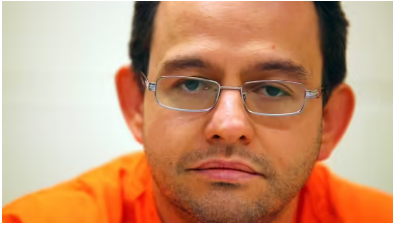


## Law catches up with driver in '01 fatality



By **ANN GIVENS**

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Sebastian Barba at the [Nassau](#) County Jail in [East Meadow](#). (Jan. 16, 2013)  
Credit: Howard Schnapp

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The moment [Sebastian](#) Barba saw immigration officials board his plane in November as it sat on the tarmac at a Panama airport, he knew a mistake he made on a [Westbury](#) street more than a decade before had caught up with him.

"I've always thought that someday it was going to come back," he said of the day he ran over and killed a [Westbury](#) woman -- on Feb. 6, 2001. "In life, you always pay."

It is 12 years this week since Barba's [Cadillac](#) struck 80-year-old Jean Renison in a crosswalk. In November he was arrested and charged with depraved indifference murder.

The [Cadillac](#) knocked Renison to the ground, both Barba and prosecutors say. Barba remembers stopping his [Cadillac](#) briefly before driving away. Prosecutors said the young stockbroker-in-training drove over Renison, crushing her skull and chest underneath his tires.

Barba then fled to Ecuador, where he has dual citizenship. Featured on the television show "[America's Most Wanted](#)" before he was caught by Interpol, he now faces a maximum of 25 years to life in prison. He is due back in court Feb. 25.

### *Leaving scene 'mystifying'*

Barba's decision to flee mystifies Renison's niece, who said she gets physically ill at the thought of how the retired schoolteacher and [World War II](#) intelligence officer died.

"Had he stopped the car, she wouldn't have been killed," said Maura Beede, of Yardley, Pa. "If I hit a dog, I would stop. I can't imagine hitting and killing a human being and then going on with my life as though nothing ever happened."

Beede said her aunt, who never married and had no children, was like a second mother to her. Renison was a schoolteacher and a librarian who exposed her nieces and nephews to things that their own parents were often too busy to spend time on: restaurants and museums in Manhattan and the world of books.

"Any time I think of what she must have experienced in her last moments, I just go nuts," Beede said.

Barba, now 35, says he will fight the charges against him and hopes somehow to resume his life with his wife, Denisse, and their three children, Camila, 8, Mathias, 7, and Sophia, 2, in the seaside town of Guayaquil, Ecuador.

But he also says that being captured and imprisoned is a "relief" after more than a decade spent looking over his shoulder.

"I feel a lot of remorse to this day," he said in a recent interview at the Nassau County Jail with his lawyer, Jonathan Marks, of Manhattan. "I don't think this is something I will ever be able to get out of my mind."

Prosecutors say Barba was taking a left onto Post Avenue from Maple Avenue about 10 a.m. on Feb. 6, 2001, when he hit Renison. She was crossing the street in the crosswalk to go to the hairdresser, her brother said at the time.

Barba was driving slowly, and Renison fell onto his hood and then slid off, landing on the street in front of his car, both he and prosecutors agree. Renison was almost surely still alive and would have recovered if Barba had stopped at that point, prosecutor [Brendan Ahern](#) said.

Instead, Barba stepped on the gas and drove his Cadillac over Renison's body as onlookers screamed at him to stop, Ahern and court documents say.

'I got scared'

Barba now says he knew he'd hit a person but had no idea how seriously Renison was hurt. In his panic, Barba said he drove away because he feared that if he had stayed, a mob could gather and hurt him.

"I was frozen. I got scared. I started to sweat. That's the moment I accelerated and left the scene," Barba said.

Five hours later he called [Nassau](#) police, gave his name and asked if the woman he hit had filed a report, court records show. He left before they showed up to take his report, prosecutors and court documents say.

Barba's brother, Joaquin Barba, said when his brother first got back to Ecuador, he spent about two months working on a family farm in a remote local area. He was depressed, Joaquin Barba says. He gained weight, grew a beard, lost interest in seeing friends, Joaquin Barba said.

Soon, though, [Sebastian](#) Barba was given the reins of a branch office of the family construction materials business, and he threw himself into work, Joaquin Barba said.

Within a year Sebastian Barba wrote to Denisse, his then-girlfriend who was living in Florida, and asked her to move to Ecuador and marry him. She accepted.

"He barely knew what had happened," Denisse Barba said in an interview on a recent trip to visit her husband at the jail. "He was nervous and in shock. I was his girlfriend, but I couldn't tell him what to do."

In Guayaquil, Sebastian Barba was an involved father, taking his daughter to ballet, his son to soccer, caring for them alone for weeks when his wife had to come to America to care for a sick relative, Denisse Barba said.

Over time, she said, she was able to move past her worry about the accident. When she heard her husband had been featured on "[America's Most Wanted](#)," she did not use the computer to investigate, saying she could not face what had happened.

"Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine we would go through this," Denisse Barba said.

Ahern said if Sebastian Barba had stayed in Ecuador, he might never have been caught, since the [United States](#) doesn't have an extradition treaty with that country. But when Interpol learned Barba was traveling between the [Dominican Republic](#) and Panama for business, two countries that do have cooperation agreements with the [United States](#), they saw their chance. Panamanian police pulled him off the plane and brought him to an interview room, where they asked him if he'd been involved in an accident in 2001.

"I said, 'Yes, that's me,' " Barba said.