

A4: Wednesday, May 5, 1999 * *

Motive murky in tots' deaths

2 killed as car hits playground

By Deborah Hastings
Associated Press

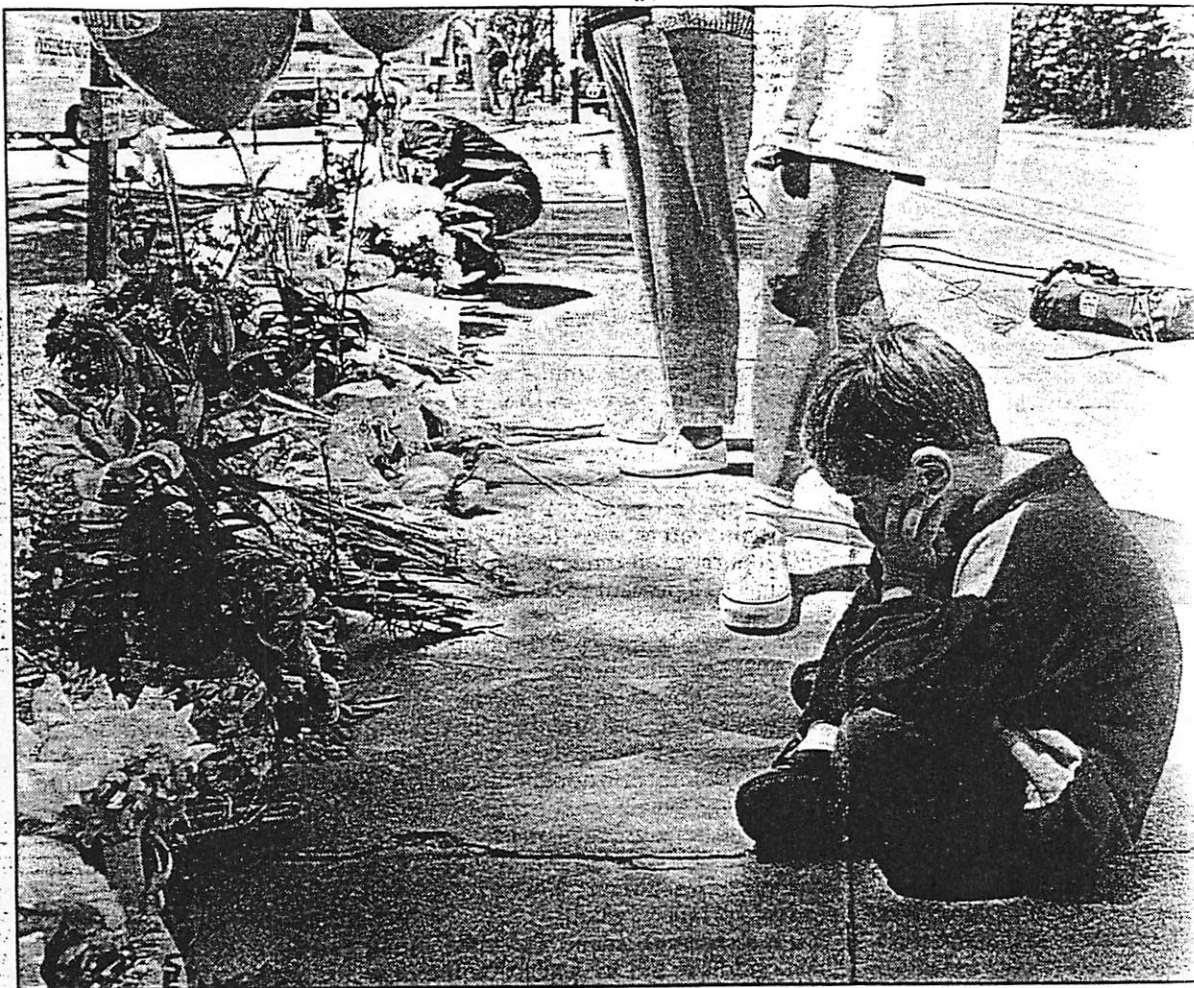
COSTA MESA — Steven Allen Abrams cruised by the day-care center in his big Cadillac, pulled a U-turn, gunned the accelerator and drove straight into a playground of toddlers, police said.

"I was going to execute these children because they were innocent," Abrams told police, according to Lt. Ron Smith.

And so 4-year-old Sierra Soto and 3-year-old Brandon Wiener died Monday. Nicholas McHardy, 2, and Victoria Sherman, 5, remained in critical condition Tuesday. Teacher's aide Danielle Knecht was hospitalized with a broken leg. Two other injured toddlers were treated and released.

"Why he picked yesterday, why he picked this school, why he picked these kids, we don't know," Smith said. Nor did anyone else at Southcoast Early Childhood Learning Center, where mothers sobbed Tuesday and neighbors knelt in prayer in an upper-middle-class neighborhood that prides itself on community.

Forty-five minutes before the killings, Abrams got angry at a motorist on the nearby Costa Mesa Freeway, Smith said. In a fit of road rage, Abrams rammed a car that cut him off, the lieutenant said.



Associated Press photo

Five-year-old Tommy Bubonic ponders a shrine of flowers and balloons that grew steadily Tues-

day at a Costa Mesa day-care center where youngsters were killed under a car's wheels

Smith said. Abrams is being held without bail.

His statements to police were baffling, investigators said.

"In his mind, he associated the school with the neighborhood he used to live in," Smith said. Five years ago, Abrams was arrested and accused of stalking a former girlfriend after their relationship ended. They had lived near the preschool.

"He has no connection to this school," Smith said. "He didn't know anyone at this school. He didn't know any of the children."

Abrams worked at the Ticket Shack, just blocks away. His brother-in-law, who runs the agency specializing in rock, theater and sports tickets, was speechless when asked if Abrams was capable of murder.

After dropping his 19-year-old daughter at the home they shared in Santa Ana, Abrams returned to the neighborhood. When his brown Cadillac finally stopped, several children were pinned underneath.

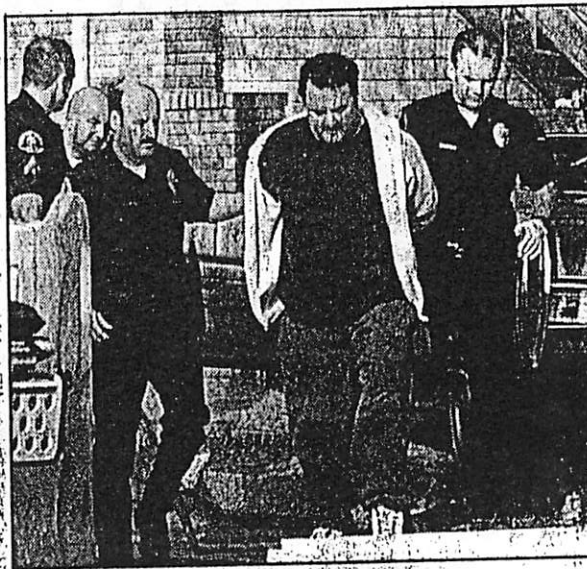
"Yesterday I just kept saying, 'It was an accident, it was an accident.' But it wasn't, and that makes it even worse," said resident Karen McFarland. "This is a neighborhood of families. Those kids were always outside playing."

Abrams, 39, faces two counts of murder and five counts of assault with a deadly weapon at an arraignment scheduled for today,

Ken Overland, 58, could only shake his head. Standing behind his storefront window heralding tickets to a Dave Matthews Band concert, Overland said Abrams was an employee and a friend, someone he'd worked with nearly 15 years.

"I couldn't believe it," Overland said. Abrams didn't have a violent temper — "He'd get into an argument, but 15 minutes later he'd be back to normal."

Overland said he knew nothing of Abrams' stalking arrest.



Steven Allan Abrams is taken into custody Monday. He is being held without bail and awaits arraignment today in connection with the Costa Mesa day-care tragedy Monday.

The school was closed Tuesday and will remain so indefinitely. A memorial service, said a weeping Sheryl Hawkinson, the school's owner, is scheduled for tonight at a church across the street.

Meanwhile, a shrine formed at the school. An ever-growing mound of bouquets, balloons, stuffed animals and cards fronted a chain-link fence torn to pieces.

A cross erected in the playground read, "Dear God, please protect our children."

That's just what school workers, neighbors and witnesses tried to do as they frantically struggled to

lift the car. After Abrams' car came to a stop, he never made a move, said police who arrested him. He just sat behind the wheel, waiting.

"A man who would do something like this doesn't deserve to live," said Ann Pecora, fighting back tears as gripped the hand of her 4-year-old daughter, Gina, who was one of the lucky toddlers Monday.

"An eye for an eye," said her husband. Unlike his wife, Tom Pecora was not sad. He was furious.

"I'd like to see him dead," Pecora said.