

Quake aftermath

A kiss saved his life

Slide missed commuter by a few feet

By GREG BEEBE
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — Anthony Loero was in the wrong place at the right time.

Loero, 36, narrowly escaped certain injury, and possibly even death, in Tuesday afternoon's earthquake. The Prospect Heights resident missed being buried under tons of rock and dirt on Highway 17 by mere seconds.

And he has his 7-year-old daughter, Megan, to thank.

Megan wanted a kiss from her daddy before he hurriedly left town Tuesday for San Jose City College, where he was scheduled to take a midterm exam.

Megan's affection delayed Loero's departure for a few seconds, and probably saved his life.

"Yesterday and today it really came home about how close I was to getting buried," Loero said.

The Lockheed air-conditioning mechanic's journey began at 4:45 p.m. when he left the house for San Jose, an important controls-class examination on his mind.

While driving Highway 17, Loero said "I was concentrating on my midterm, going through it a little bit in my head."

As he entered Laurel Curve, "at first it felt like I had a flat tire. I thought, 'Oh, no, now I'm going to miss my midterm,'" Loero said.

"Then, I really started losing control. I thought I was having a major mechanical breakdown. I started looking for a place to pull over, still not realizing it was an earthquake.

"Then I started to see the mountain coming down in front of me.

"I was just coming out of the left turn at Laurel slide, coming out of the curve and starting to bank right, when I realized that there was something major going on," Loero said.

"I thought to myself, 'I've got to stop this car,' hoping that the mountain would stop falling down. I either bounced or skidded to a stop. I remember putting on the emergency brake and jumping out of the car. There was a guy in a Mercedes to the right of me, and it looked like the mountain was going to cover him.

"He got out of his Mercedes and said 'The heck with the car' and started running toward the divider. We were both standing by the divider when the mountain just stopped right in front of us.

"There was a lady behind me in a white car and I told her to get out. She didn't know what was going on. She thought she had a flat tire," Loero said.

The slide covered both north-bound lanes of Highway 17. Loero estimated it was at least 10 feet high and two blocks long.

"I couldn't believe the size of the boulders," he said.

Still shell-shocked and shaken by aftershocks, the threesome of motorists decided to get out — fast.

"We decided to turn the cars around and get out of there," Loero said. "I turned the lady's car around for her and told her to get in and get out of there. The guy in the Mercedes, he left.

"I ran up to the other side of the slide to see if there were any cars in there. There was no way I could tell. I listened for honking because I remembered some cars passing me along that stretch.

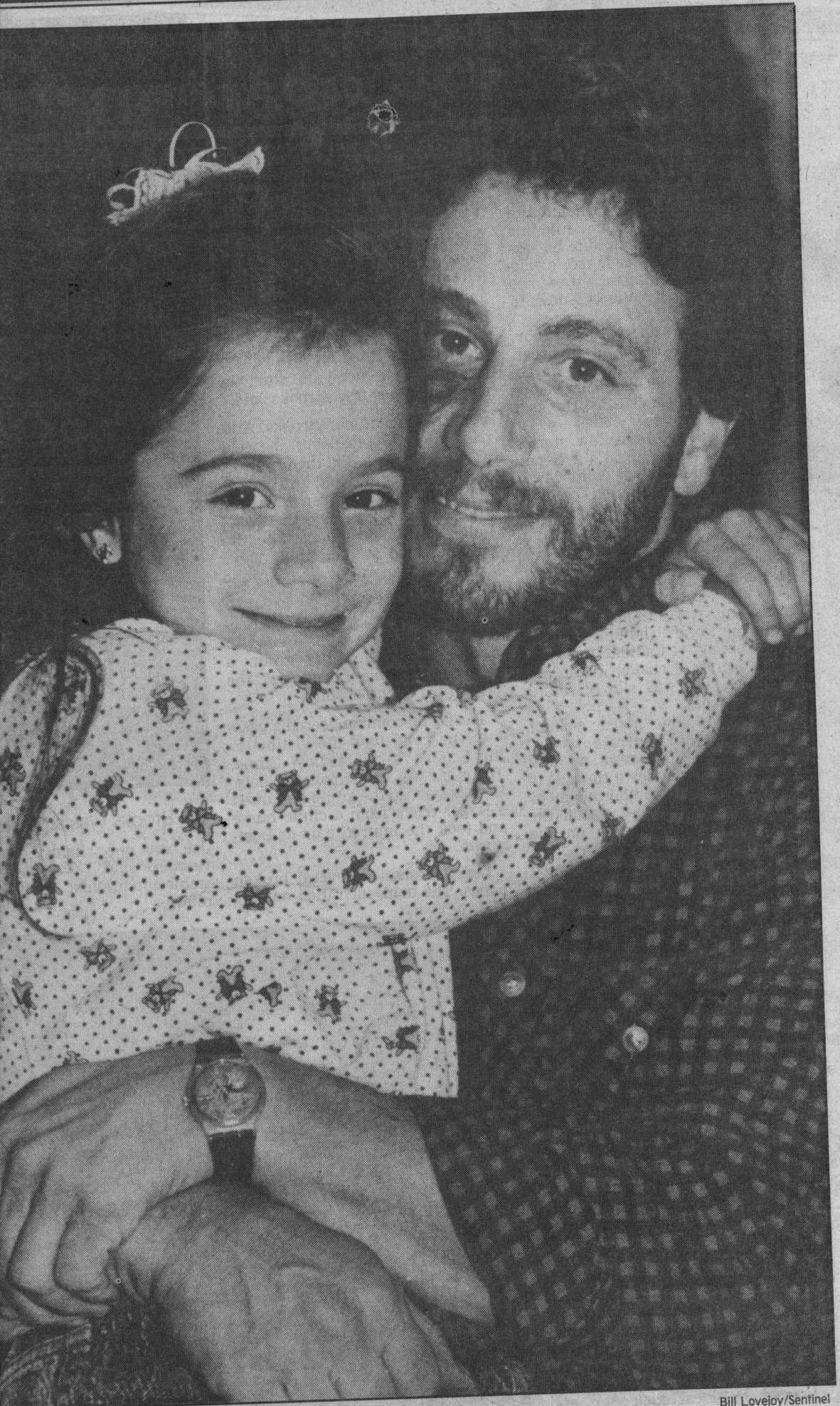
"Here I was in the middle of Highway 17. No cars came during the slide. It looked like everything was in slow motion, like I was watching a movie on a big screen.

"I finally got the heck out of there. Highway 17 was a total mess. There were big cracks and big (asphalt) mountains. The hills were destroyed," Loero said.

Loero reflected on what a difference a few seconds made.

"I needed to get to school early because the test was going to start early. When my wife got home I said goodbye right away. When I was backing out of the driveway, my daughter Megan came running out and wanted to give me a kiss goodbye.

"That slowed me down by a few seconds."



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

wasn't for Megan Loero's insistence on a kiss, her dad Anthony could have been killed.