

Oakland Tribune

Young girl 'lucky' after I-680 plane crash

Heather MacDonald, STAFF WRITER

April 15, 2004

OAKLAND -- An 11-year-old Danville girl came close to losing her leg - and her dream of one day playing professional soccer -- when a single-engine plane fell out of the sky Tuesday and crashed onto Interstate 680 and into her family's van.

Dr. Monica Kogan, an orthopedic surgeon at Children's Hospital Oakland, said Wednesday that it was a miracle the plane's propeller, which sliced into Ariana's left thigh, did not sever any arteries or nerves.

"It was a matter of millimeters," Kogan said.

On Wednesday afternoon, Ariana's father, Armando Jimenez, faced a phalanx of television cameras and reporters to thank Kogan and the other doctors who treated Ariana, the only person injured in the fiery plane crash on I-680 during Tuesday afternoon's rush hour.

"It's going to be a long recuperation," said Jimenez, 47, of Danville, tears welling in his eyes. "But she's very lucky. Somebody was looking out for her. Now she's in great hands."

The Federal Aviation Administration and the National Transportation Safety Board are investigating the crash, as are Contra Costa County officials.

"I'm still in shock," Jimenez said. "I'm just praying."

Ariana's injuries were so severe doctors considered amputating her leg at one point, her father said.

"I said 'Oh, no, her soccer days are over,'" Jimenez said. He proudly recounted how his daughter scored nearly 20 goals last year with the Patriots, a local team.

"She even said that one day she thought she might want to be a professional soccer player," Jimenez said.

The incident was a traffic nightmare for commuters, blocking I- 680 in both directions for several hours. All lanes on the freeway did not reopen until after 10 p.m., according to the California Highway Patrol.

Listed in good condition, Ariana underwent her second surgery Wednesday. She'll spend three or four more days at Children's Hospital Oakland and then face months of physical therapy, according to Kogan.

It is too early to say whether Ariana will regain full use of her leg and play soccer again, Kogan said.

"Most of the muscle was sliced through," Kogan said. "It was a very serious wound and fracture."

Despite her injury, her father said he expects Ariana to make a full recovery.

"She's very strong," Jimenez said. "She'll be able to handle it."

The pilot of the Piper plane, Robert "Curt" Hatch Jr. of Grand Junction, Colo., visited Ariana before she went into surgery to apologize for the crash, according to her father. Neither Hatch nor his son, Robert Hatch III, were injured.

Hatch said the plane lost power soon after takeoff from Buchanan Field in Concord, forcing him to make an emergency landing on the freeway. Before bursting into flames, the plane crashed into the van carrying Ariana and four other members of her family, who were taken to John Muir Medical Center and treated for bruises and cuts from the flying debris.

Also Wednesday, Contra Costa County Supervisor Mark DeSaulnier renewed his call for Buchanan Field to be relocated to a less-urban area, and the land redeveloped for homes. The FAA and other area lawmakers oppose the proposal.

Staff writer Simon Read and wire services contributed to this report.