

## QUEENS DRIVER GUILTY OF LESSER RAP IN DEATH

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The motorist accused of drunkenly running down Queens honor student Melissa Tang was acquitted of manslaughter charges yesterday, culminating an emotional case that had galvanized much of the city's Asian community.

Tang's parents burst into tears as Justice Pearl Corrado announced that Edgar Morales was guilty of criminally negligent homicide but not of the more serious charges that could have sent him to prison for up to 15 years.

Morales, 28, of Bayside, will face no more than four years behind bars and perhaps as little as less than one year when he is sentenced Nov. 20.

"This can't be happening," sobbed Millio Tang, Melissa's mother. "He put my daughter to death, and now he can walk away within a year," she wept. "There is no justice. . ."

"My daughter's life was final," said a furious Herman Tang. "But his [Morales] life goes on after the sentence."

The Tangs had collected 26,000 signatures on a petition urging the judge to throw the book at the man whose vehicle fatally struck their daughter on the eve of her 13th birthday last spring.

And they had urged prosecutors not to make Morales any offers for a plea deal.

Queens District Attorney Richard Brown's office did indeed offer Morales a three-to-nine-year deal which Morales rejected and yesterday Brown expressed regret that so light a verdict was imposed.

"We believe that there was sufficient evidence to find him guilty of reckless manslaughter," Brown said. "We will recommend that the defendant be sentenced to the maximum penalty allowed by law. His reckless disregard for human life must be dealt with. . ."

Corrado deliberated for a day before delivering the verdict that will give Morales less jail time than the district attorney's deal had offered him.

She found him innocent of manslaughter, vehicular manslaughter, one assault count, driving while intoxicated and leaving the scene of an accident. He stands guilty of criminally negligent homicide, three counts of assault and reckless endangerment.

The judge made no explanation in court of her ruling, and later did not return the Daily News' calls.

"She decided to make her own decision regardless of the evidence," snapped Herman Tang.

Stone-faced throughout the three-week trial, Morales stayed that way as he was led from the courtroom.

His attorney, Robert DiDio, said he was satisfied. "I expressed all along to the DA that I felt that the offer was not consistent with the evidence. Today's verdict proves that I was right."

Melissa died March 11, when Morales, speeding in Whitestone, ran her down. He was captured by police minutes later, after fleeing the accident scene and crashing his car head-on with a van.

Morales' blood alcohol level was .102 two hours after the fatal crash, just above the .1 legal limit for drunkenness, and prosecutors said Morales had a bottle of vodka in his car.

But DiDio produced expert witnesses who said the alcohol level in Morales' blood may have peaked when he was tested not when he hit Melissa.