Injured university employee calls for change to busy campus intersection

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After she was struck by a car at the intersection of Johnston and St. Mary streets, University of Louisiana at Lafayette employee Katie Atkins is calling for a change.

"I was walking back to my car after I got off 4my shift at 5 on June 5," said Atkins. "So this day I was walking down St. Mary. I was by the French house and I was going to cross that street going towards the Burger King on Johnston."

Atkins, 23, and a staff member for the University’s library, said she was assigned, because of being a new hire, lot 33, which is located behind the McDonalds parking lot on Johnston.

"I got the ‘safe to walk’ signal and I glanced up at the light across the street just to double check," Atkins said. "It was solid green with no arrow, so it was ‘yield’ and I looked both ways," she said.

Atkins said she was halfway through the crosswalk on Johnston Street when she was struck on her right side by a white Nissan Altima, breaking her arm and sending her flying.

"Where I landed, I landed in about the driving way to Burger King, so I was thrown several feet," Atkins recalled, her arm in a sling. "If anything from the crash, I remember the initial sound it made, that very full ‘bam’ but just amplified, just all around, everywhere."

Atkins said that she would like to get that sign changed because that particular crosswalk was never protected by a red light.

"There is a lot of motorist movement allowed in that crosswalk anytime pedestrians are crossing," Atkins said. "It puts the pressure to yield and these pedestrians entirely on the driver."

Atkins said they have the ‘yield to oncoming traffic’ on solid green, next to the light itself. And next to the other light has the ‘right turn yield to pedestrians’ but they have no sign indicating yield to pedestrians at the crosswalk when the light is green.

"My mom and I drove to that intersection recently," Atkins said. "We looked at the signage and there is a ‘watch for pedestrians’ sign that is high on a lamppost where you wouldn’t see it unless you were looking for it."

Atkins was forced to sleep on her couch, unable to sleep in her bed in her upstairs home. Atkins said she was contacted immediately the following day of the accident by Joey Pons, associate director of public safety and risk manager for UL Lafayette.

"Certainly I was concerned," Pons said of Atkins’ accident. "One of our employees was seriously hurt and anytime that happens, that is some concern to me."

Pons added there is nothing more important than the safety of their campus community and they work to do everything to ensure that.

After the driver failed to yield to Atkins, Pons said looking at all the programming regarding the traffic signals will be taken into consideration.

"You have portions of the signals that are dedicated to pedestrians and portions devoted to traffic," Pons said.

Pons said he then reached out the city for help.

"The university is lucky to have a close relationship with the departments within the city that are related to public safety,” Pons said.

Warren Abadie, city and parish transportation engineer for Lafayette, said the idea to add signage to better protect the pedestrians isn’t possible right now based on logistics. The street, which is already a source of significant traffic congestion, would become even more problematic.

"The problem is that the traffic on Johnston Street is too heavy for that," Abadie said. "In order to create that, you’d have to take time away from Johnston Street."

Abadie also noted that at this point, it’s not feasible to change the signage for Johnston and St. Mary.

Atkins said that the psychological damage of that day far outweighs the physical.

"I was fortunate to walk away with minor injuries," Atkins said, but added, "It took me a long time to stop replaying the scene in my head. I’m afraid to get behind the wheel of my car."

Atkins said it’s been scary for her, mentioning that she isn’t sure if she can ever cross the street again but noted that she wants to do everything she can to ensure no one else is involved in an accident like that again.

"I will always be an advocate for change in that intersection for pedestrians," Atkins said. "If I can just get the word out that there is hidden dangers there, then I’d feel much better."