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Unalakleet man kills himself in back seat of police car

DUI SUSPECT: 22-year-old wasn't searched before being handcuffed, placed in vehicle.

Author: *JAMES HALPIN*

jhalpin@adn.com

Staff

Article Text:

A Unalakleet man accused of colliding with a 10-year-old girl while he was driving drunk on a four-wheeler shot and killed himself minutes later while handcuffed in the back of a city police car, according to Alaska State Troopers.

Dane Johnson, 22, was driving a Honda four-wheeler down the village's main road when he struck the girl shortly before midnight Friday as she walked with a friend, troopers said.

Johnson stayed on the scene until an Unalakleet police officer arrived and observed Johnson appearing intoxicated, troopers spokeswoman Megan Peters said. The officer cuffed him and put him in the back seat of his patrol car, then turned his attention to the girl.

"Everyone was focused on the injured girl," Peters said. "The guy was being cooperative. He remained on scene. I don't believe anyone tried to search him. ... It's not something that you might expect."

Just as Unalakleet-based troopers were arriving at the scene, Johnson fatally shot himself inside the patrol car with one of two concealed handguns, Peters said. He died at the Unalakleet clinic.

"This should have never happened," said his father, Brian Johnson. "My son was shaking on the back of a four-wheeler and he was obviously in shock and whatnot, and the officer didn't check or frisk him or anything. He just cuffed him and put him in the back of the vehicle."

Johnson had the two handguns -- a .22 and a .357 -- because he was on his way back from a grouse-hunting trip, his father said. They were stuffed in his side pockets and may have been hard to spot because of thick Carhartt clothing he was wearing.

Johnson's father said the officer was a man he knows, George Turner Sr. It was unclear Sunday if Turner was still on active duty. Reached at his home, Turner refused to comment and directed questions to the city. An attempt to reach the mayor, William Johnson, was not successful.

An officer who answered the phone at the Unalakleet Police Department said he did not know anything about the incident and could not comment if he did. A message left at the home of the police supervisor, Henry Ivanoff, was not returned Sunday.

Peters said troopers were investigating the entire incident. She didn't know if the failure to search the prisoner might be a violation of state law, local department procedure or both. Troopers were only examining whether it violated state law, she said.

With a population of 725, Unalakleet is 395 miles northwest of Anchorage on Norton Sound at the mouth of the Unalakleet River.

In a town that size, everyone knows everyone, Brian Johnson said. His family knows the injured girl, Josie Nicholas, and her family well, he said. The crash broke her femur and possibly collar bone, he said, and she was knocked out for a while after the impact. She was medevacked to be treated for non-life threatening injuries. Johnson said she would be OK.

He doesn't dispute that his son likely made a bad choice to drink and drive. But such a crime should have prompted a search, Johnson said, especially when dealing with an intoxicated man.

"Unfortunately, that probably had a lot to do with it," he said. "I think that he thought he had killed her. You know, you can't reason very well under the influence of alcohol. He probably thought that to make it right was to take his own life."

"I know this all could have been prevented."

Find James Halpin online at adn.com/contact/jhalpin or call him at 257-4589.

Caption:

Photo 1: Quote marks_092208.jpg

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