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Charge filed in fatal accident

Speeding driver ran several red lights before crash, police say

Author: AMY UPSHAW ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

Article Text:

A man accused of leading an Arkansas State Police trooper on a chase into downtown Malvern before crashing into another motorist who later died has been charged with manslaughter.

Jerry Collins, 56, has no memory of the Feb. 25 accident that killed 74-year-old Larry Burnett, said Sheril Caradine, Collins' sister.

On the day of the accident, state police Cpl. Chad Staley said he saw Collins' minivan speed past two cars idling at a red light on U.S. 270. Staley turned his patrol car around and said he saw the van drive through another light.

The van continued passing traffic erratically as it ran another red light at North Main Street, according to state police records on the pursuit.

As the van began to go through another red light at Pine Bluff Street, it crashed into Burnett's car, the records show. In all, the chase lasted less than two miles.

According to the arrest affidavit on Collins, he was driving 85 mph in the seconds before the crash, "the throttle was depressed to 100 [percent] and the brakes were not applied."

Collins, who could not be reached for comment Thursday, was severely injured in the crash and was hospitalized or in physical therapy until April 3. His sister said he's now home but is still under a nurse's care.

Caradine did not know that the warrant charging her brother with manslaughter, a Class C felony, was served Monday. It was filed at the Hot Spring County Courthouse on Wednesday. A Class C felony carries a punishment of between three and 10 years in prison.

According to the Hot Spring County jail, Collins was not incarcerated after he was served with the warrant. A jailer who answered the telephone Thursday said Collins had last been jailed there Oct. 13 on a charge of probation violation.

The jailer did not provide any details explaining why Collins was on probation, and no information about that was available Thursday afternoon.

His sister said she believes her brother, who is a diabetic and schizophrenic, was having problems with his blood sugar at the time of the accident.

"I don't think he should be charged with manslaughter," Caradine said. "He has a mental condition. I still think he was sick when this happened. That's not his normal behavior."

Prosecuting Attorney Eddy Easley did not return a telephone message seeking comment Thursday.

Another prosecutor handling the case was reached but gave his name only as Richard. When told that a reporter was calling, he said, "I don't talk to reporters since they misquoted me." He then hung up the phone.

Meanwhile, Burnett's wife of 52 years, Venette Burnett, said Thursday that she didn't know

enough about the charges against Collins to comment.

When Collins' minivan smashed into Burnett's car, the dashboard crushed his legs. He also suffered internal injuries that eventually killed him March 27.

Burnett, a beekeeper, had driven the 18 or so miles from his home in Friendship to Malvern that day to mail a package and then visit a sick friend.

He was less than a block from his friend's barbershop when the crash occurred.

Last week, Venette Burnett described her husband as a "wonderful husband and a good father" who was at church every time the door was open.

Caption:

Burnett

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