

Plain Dealer, The (Cleveland, OH)

May 11, 2007

Edition: Final

Section: Metro

Page: B1

Driver in fatal crash killed girl in '98 Man had served 7 years in prison

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Article Text:

A driver who crashed Wednesday night during a police chase, killing another motorist, took the life of a little girl nine years ago in another crash.

Lawrence Ray was convicted of drug charges and aggravated vehicular homicide in the 1998 crash in Valley View that killed 5-year-old Angelica Wise of Parma.

Ray, 30, was released from prison in May 2006 after serving a seven-year sentence. A year later, he became involved in the crash at East 105th Street and Chester Avenue.

The Dodge Caravan that Ray was driving at a high rate of speed to elude police hit a Jeep Cherokee, killing its driver, 45-year-old John J. Rankin of Cleveland.

Now Ray is in Huron Hospital recovering from a broken leg, with police ready to take him to jail as soon as he recovers. Accident investigators are building a case that may mean Ray will once again be charged with vehicular homicide.

At the same time, another set of police investigators is probing the chase that prompted the crash. That is standard police procedure for all pursuit-related crashes. The evidence they will review will include recordings of the officers talking on their radios, said Lt. Thomas Stacho, police spokesman.

The Plain Dealer acquired those tapes. On them, Lt. Benjamin Gaba, a 21-year veteran, calls off the chase after about 95 seconds, more than a minute before the crash. But the tapes do not make clear whether all officers pursuing Ray followed the order.

Some witnesses say the officers did not. Tanesha Thomas, 25, of Cleveland Heights, said that the van and several police cars flew past her and she followed them out of curiosity.

"They did not stop for one second chasing him until the accident happened," she said. "That's why the dude kept going, because they were still chasing him."

The chase began after Cleveland police - working with agents from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives - attempted to pull over the van Ray was driving because they thought he and the two men in the van with him were making a drug deal. After the crash, police found marijuana, crack cocaine and a gun in the van, according to police reports.

After about 95 seconds, Gaba ordered officers to let the van go. Department policy calls for doing so when crashes could injure innocent people.

Rankin was en route from his job at Vincent Lighting Co. to his home near Forest Hill Park. He shared his home with two cats, Cosmo and Jeep, said Mary Cutter, one of his three older sisters, reached by phone at her home in Bellevue, Neb.

Rankin's other two sisters live in Arizona and Hawaii. The siblings might have drifted apart if not for Rankin. He frequently called family members and shared what was going on with everyone else.

"John was really the glue that kept our family close, keeping the news of each other current," Cutter said.

The shock of her brother's death was amplified because she was supposed to see him this weekend, Cutter said. Rankin planned to fly to Omaha and join family in celebrating a nephew's high school graduation.

Another sister, Margaret Gatchell, had planned to fly with her children from Arizona for the graduation party. Instead, she is coming to Cleveland to retrieve her brother's body to take it back to Nebraska for burial.

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