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Man who fled cops is charged in fatal crash

Victim, 28, had recently become more conscious of reckless drivers

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Article Text:

As she drove around the Twin Cities area with her mother last month, Jenni Stebleton commented on all the vehicles that raced through stop signs and lights. The 28-year-old south Minneapolis resident said she had become more conscious of bad drivers after she was recently rear-ended waiting in her car at a stop sign.

Stebleton and a friend visiting from Davenport, Iowa, had returned a movie and were blocks from her home Tuesday night when a man fleeing police ran a stop sign and crashed into her car at 46th St. and 3rd Av. S. She died there. Her friend, Michael Slusarchuk, 36, remained in critical condition Wednesday night at Hennepin County Medical Center.

"I'm not a person who gets angry very easily," said Elaine Stebleton, Jenni's mother. "I understand I will at some point. I'm just in shock right now."

Rico P. Howard, 45, was charged with second-degree murder while committing the felony of fleeing an officer, second-degree manslaughter and criminal vehicular operation. His bail was set at $250,000, but he is under guard at a hospital while he recovers from serious injuries.

The **chase** began about 11:40 p.m. when two officers in a squad car saw Howard's car sitting for several minutes at a stop sign at 44th St. and 4th Av. S. and then shone a spotlight on the driver to see if he was OK, said Sgt. Troy Schmitz. One officer mistook Howard for a man wanted by authorities.

After he drove away, the officers followed Howard and turned on their lights and siren to stop his car. They followed the car as it circled the neighborhood at about 15 to 20 miles per hour and went south on 3rd Avenue S.

Howard accelerated as he crossed 45th Street, ran a stop sign at 46th and hit Stebleton's car on the driver's side, Schmitz said. Police detected no signs of alcohol or drug use by Howard, but a blood test is being done, Schmitz said.

Officers Lance Faust and Jonathan Hoff followed department procedures by using lights and siren and radioing that they were trying to stop the car, Schmitz said. A supervisor listened by radio as the officers described the six-block pursuit, which only reached dangerous speeds during the last block before the crash, Schmitz said.

State records show that Howard's driver's license was revoked and that he had four convictions for assault and unlawful possession of drugs and weapons. He is on probation for a drug offense.

A witness told police he found a .38-caliber pistol after Howard's car passed his house in the 4400 block of 3rd Av. S. Police have the gun.

Elaine Stebleton said she had talked to her daughter about 8 p.m. Tuesday.

Jenni Stebleton grew up in Middleton, Wis., a suburb of Madison, and graduated from the University of Minnesota with a business degree. She worked in marketing at the Carlson Companies.

"She was very passionate about whatever she was involved in," said her brother, Mike Stebleton of St. Paul.
Her greatest love was travelling. She had been to Arizona and New Mexico in April, and in past years she had traveled through Ireland and India with her family.
"She was trying to get me to take a trip to Italy next month," her mother said.
She talked about how her daughter was always looking out for her needs: "She knew I would have trouble driving all the way to my high school reunion in North Dakota in June, so she took vacation time and went with me."
Stebleton's death was Minneapolis' third in two weeks involving an accident as a driver fled police. **Hernan J. Brito**-**Alvarado**, 17, and his cousin Javier Cedillo-**Brito**, 25, died after a Cambridge, Minn., man drove through a stop sign in northeast Minneapolis on Aug. 10, police said. An officer had lost sight of Jeffrey **J.** Hookham's car and had turned off lights and siren before the crash with Cedillo-**Brito**'s car at 7th and University Avs. NE. Hookham was charged with second-degree murder.
Elaine Stebleton didn't want to discuss police **chase** policy, but "maybe talking about our loss may somehow benefit somebody else in the future."
"She was an innocent person," she said. "She could have continued to make a lot more people happy."