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Non-ticketed driver in fatal Kenosha County crash is sheriff's cousin

Girl was killed during walk with friend

By Bruce Vielmetti and Alex Morrell of the Journal Sentinel

Sept. 3, 2010 | (103) COMMENTS



Michelina "Micki" Combs

The driver who struck and killed a 15-year-old girl in Kenosha County is Sheriff David G. Beth's cousin.

The victim's mother and her lawyers in a civil case have [raised questions about the investigation](#) of the June 17 crash after no charges or citations were issued to Denise Heckel, a former dispatcher for the Kenosha County Sheriff's Department and other agencies.

Authorities who defended the decisions to a reporter on Thursday, and discussed public perceptions of possible bias when law enforcement officials are subjects of investigations, did not mention Heckel's relationship to the sheriff.

Heckel, 42, was in a car with her husband, a Kenosha police sergeant, when she struck and killed Michelina "Micki" Combs on County Highway D in Paris about 9 p.m. Combs was walking with a friend in the same westbound lane Heckel was traveling.

Assistant District Attorney Richard Ginkowski didn't learn that Beth is a cousin of Heckel until Friday. He and District Attorney Robert Zapf will review the new information next week, Zapf said Friday night.

"(Ginkowski) wasn't made personally aware of that. I had a quick opportunity to review some of the information. It appears the investigation proceeded in a normal course," Zapf said.

Zapf said a meeting is scheduled with the Combs family next week so they can ask questions and provide additional evidence, but he said he doesn't know that the sheriff's relationship had an impact on the investigation.

"I'm not sure that it plays any significant role in the investigation at this point," Zapf said. "If they have more information, we will take that into consideration."

Beth said Friday that he was aware there had been a fatal crash involving a pedestrian that night, but did not know Heckel was driving until the next day, when he alerted staff to keep him out of the case because of his family connection to Heckel. He said he has had nothing to do with the investigation.

Beth said from what he's heard since, the case was handled professionally and impartially and he wouldn't have done anything differently.

Officials said Heckel, who admitted drinking five wine coolers earlier that day, showed no signs of intoxication at the crash scene. She had been driving safely and legally, according to witnesses.

Heckel told investigators she had drunk only water after 6:30 p.m. Tests more than two hours after the crash showed a blood alcohol concentration of 0.057. Wisconsin law defines legally intoxicated as 0.08 or above.

Antonio Romanucci, a Chicago attorney who represents Combs' mother in a wrongful death lawsuit, said he, too, was unaware Heckel was a relative of the sheriff's until Friday, and said it makes it apparent that a different agency should have handled the investigation.

"Now they've left the appearance of impropriety despite their claims that that's inevitable," Romanucci said.

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