

Police seek Mercedes in New Haven fatal hit-and-run

By Katie Nelson
ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW HAVEN — Police are pressing for public help to find a dark blue Mercedes with front-end damage they suspect could be responsible for a hit and run that killed a Connecticut toddler and left his mother hospitalized Saturday night.

Investigators said Monday they believe the car's driver blew through an intersection in his two-door coupe, flipping a sport utility vehicle onto a parked car, trapping four people inside. Witnesses told police the Mercedes driver stopped long enough to inspect his own car for damage and

peer at the upended SUV from a distance before driving away.

Police held a news conference held at the crash scene, near the intersection of Mansfield and Division streets. Authorities said getting key information sooner rather than later is crucial.

"The longer time goes on, the more difficult it is going to be for us to hopefully recover the car and tie it to the scene of this crash," Lt. Joseph Witkowski said.

New Haven police said they are looking for a dark blue or black Mercedes Benz coupe made between 1998 and 2003, Sgt. Al Vazquez said.

Killed was 17-month-old Montez Stanley Jr., of New Haven. His mother, 17-year-old Mauricia Stanley, is in critical condition at Yale New Haven Hospital with a severe spinal injury and is breathing with the help of a respirator. Vazquez said doctors believe she has a 50 percent chance of permanent paralysis.

Two other family members in the car, Francine Stanley, 44, and Treyna Wearing, 10, had minor injuries.

Police said the Mercedes struck the family's SUV hard enough to flip it upside down on a parked car.

By Monday, a makeshift memo-

rial of stuffed animals, flowers and candles sat at the crash scene.

"Accidents are always going to happen," said Tanya Carmon, who said she is the toddler's cousin. "But when you take a young life and just proceed to keep going, it's sad. It's so, so sad."

Anne Nelson, 49, said she heard the crash from her apartment. The school bus driver's bedroom window overlooks the crash site.

"The car was upside down, the wheels were spinning, and I could hear cries for help," said Nelson, who called 911 and was one of about 20 people who tried to help the family.

She found a piece of a license plate holder from the Mercedes and stood over it until police arrived.

Nelson said she was heartened by the response, while reflecting on a videotape from a May 2008 accident in Hartford that appeared to show passers-by ignoring a man struck in a hit-and-run. It took a year before someone was charged.

"It was pretty much chaos," she said. "There were lots of people trying to help, which is a really good thing after what you saw up in Hartford."

"Let's hope it doesn't take them a year to find this guy."

Family to lose home over \$50 tax bill Retires

By Daniel Tepper
STAFF WRITER

BRIDGEPORT — Ever since he came to this country from Haiti, Jean Castro just wanted to live the American dream.

He worked as a mechanic in Stamford before finally saving enough money to buy a house here for himself, his wife and three children.

Now, three years later, the city is foreclosing on the single-family home on Harrah Avenue because Castro owes \$51.69 in back taxes.

"It's unbelievable," said the 49-year-old Castro as he stood beneath the large grape arbor alongside his home. "I pay my mortgage every month, I do everything I'm supposed to do, and now you tell me the city is taking my home. I'm shocked."

Last week, a Superior Court judge granted the city's foreclosure action and ordered the home to be sold in December to

satisfy the back taxes, as well as the \$2,705 in attorneys fees and foreclosure costs.

According to court records, Castro did not appear to contest the action.

Castro said he didn't know his house was in foreclosure. He said he received a letter from the city stating he had back taxes, and he turned the letter over to his mortgage company, which pays his taxes.

"The bank said it was going to take care of the back taxes, and that's the last I knew of it," he said.

In fact, court records show that nearly \$3,000 in back taxes were paid on the house, leaving a balance of \$51.69.

The city hired Lee Samowitz, a former state representative, to foreclose on Castro.

"When I was first assigned the foreclosure case, the amount owed the city was about \$4,000," he said. "I want-

ed to work it out, and I sent a couple of letters to the guy, but he never responded."

Samowitz said he learned later that Castro had paid off most of his tax debt and in fact now only owed about \$50. "But by that time, the action had already started, and there were more than \$3,000 in fees."

Court records show Samowitz is claiming about 12 hours of work on the case.

Samowitz repeated that he would have rather worked out the situation short of a foreclosure and added he wasn't even aware that Castro had a bank or mortgage company.

However, the foreclosure lawsuit signed by Samowitz lists the Deutsche Bank National Trust Co. of Santa Ana, Calif., as holding the mortgage on the home.

City officials had no immediate comment on the matter.

— Daniel Tepper writes for the Connecticut Post.

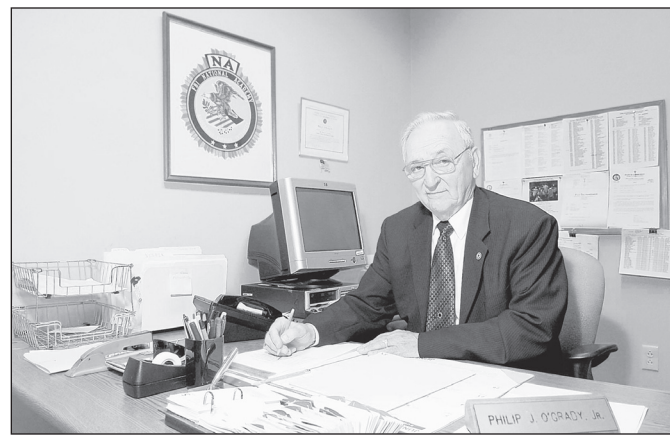
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The advice wouldn't be appreciated. He is as sharp as he ever was."

David Cohen, state's attorney for the Stamford-Norwalk Judicial District, said O'Grady has forgotten more about running the office than those who run it actually know. A few years ago, when the rooming assignments for Stamford's new courthouse were being worked out, Cohen made sure O'Grady's office was next to his. He has worked with O'Grady since 1982.

"I go in there 50 times a day. I've practically worn a path in the rug," Cohen said. "We are the good-looking guys up front in the courtroom, but without guys like Phil, we wouldn't be able to put a case on."

Supervisory Assistant State's Attorney James Bernardi said no one could find a more trustworthy inspector than O'Grady.

"He's still got it, period," Bernardi said. "I owe a lot to him. He knows the streets. When he reads a statement and someone is not giving it to us straight, he lets us know that we are not getting



SHELLEY CRYAN/FOR THE ADVOCATE

Philip O'Grady, an inspector for the state's attorney's office, sits at his desk Friday at the Stamford courthouse on Hoyt Street. He is retiring at the end of June. Hanging on the wall to his right are certificates from attending FBI training.

solid, credible evidence on our cases."

O'Grady said he will miss the excitement of working cases in the district, which includes Stamford, Norwalk, Darien, New Canaan, Wilton, Westport and Weston.

"I enjoy the job. I've been an investigator for more than half my life," he said. "I'm going to miss this place. They have a good bunch of people here. I just want to have something to do every day."

He decided to retire to take advantage of added

pension payments that are part of an early retirement incentive program the state offered in an attempt to reduce a budget deficit.

O'Grady, who has four grandchildren, a small collection of national campaign buttons and enjoys cruising antique shops, said he does not know what he will do starting July 1.

"Maybe I'll travel," he said. Then he went back to work.

— Staff Writer John Nickerson can be reached at john.nickerson@sctn.com or 964-2320.

Film

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on the \$41.5 million figure alone.

According to the commission report, the 30 percent tax credits were issued for a grand total of more than \$376.6 million worth of eligible expenditures.

For the past few years, productions have been allowed to apply for tax credits on expenses accrued out-of-state, as long as the materials being rented or purchased are used on a production in Connecticut.

So, according to the analysis, "Righteous Kill," the detective drama starring Robert De Niro, Al Pacino and rapper 50 Cent, received \$12.5 million worth of tax credits for \$41.7 million in total eligible expenditures, \$2.3 million of which were accrued while shooting in Norwalk, Bridgeport and other Connecticut locations.

"Revolutionary Road," the film starring Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet, spent \$91,707.42 shooting in lower Fairfield County but claimed \$10.9 million in eligible expenditures and received \$3.2 million worth of credits.

Norfleet said that what the analysis does not detail is the percentage of the eligible expenditures made up by taxable employee salaries.

"If you come here and work in the state — boots on the ground is what counts — you'll have to leave your 'pound of

flesh' with the Department of Revenue Services," Norfleet said.

Norfleet was not immediately able to estimate what percentage of the total \$376.6 million in eligible expenses was salaries versus out-of-state expenses.

But Shelley Geballe, an attorney for the nonprofit Connecticut Voices for Children, vocal critics of the credit program, said that even if the \$376.6 million was all salaries taxed at the top rate of 5 percent, the total \$18.8 million in taxes would not justify the credits.

"I was shocked," said Geballe, who has reviewed a copy of the tourism commission's draft analysis. She said she hoped it would encourage lawmakers to turn a more critical eye to the credits during ongoing budget discussions.

Referring to the state's current two-year deficit, which some estimates have at \$8.7 billion, Geballe said the credits are "a blank check at a time we're literally scraping for pennies."

Daily said lawmakers recognize that the credits do have a value and have helped to build up a lasting film and digital media production industry in Connecticut.

The goal during budget negotiations, she said, is not to eliminate the film, television and digital media credits, but

to decrease the gap between what productions spend in Connecticut and what they receive in return.

Norfleet said lawmakers already have imposed some limits. As of January, only 50 percent of out-of-state production expenses could qualify for the tax credits. That figure decreases to zero in 2012.

"The legislature was very forward-thinking," he said. "They knew we needed to build our infrastructure (but) over time phase out the ability to use a camera from New York and have that expense totally accrue toward your qualified Connecticut expenditures."

Earlier this year, Republican Gov. M. Jodi Rell proposed capping the total number of credits issued annually at \$30 million, but Daily said she is concerned that might prove too discouraging to the industry.

State Rep. Carlo Leone, D-Stamford, a vocal proponent of the film tax credits at the capitol, has not seen the tourism commission's report, but said he still believes the incentive has proven successful.

"It's building an industry from zero where we had nothing," Leone said. "I think down the road, we'll be able to show those numbers will be more favorable."

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Cruise

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liance of the Seas ship. The newly released testimony stems from a 2008 probate court battle in which Smith's family was contesting a settlement reached between his widow and the cruise line.

During his testimony, Walker pointed the finger at four men who were last seen with Smith the night he vanished as potential suspects.

"If anyone was involved in foul play, it was going to be one of those four men," Walker said.

The 2008 testimony also zeroed in on a meeting between the two families and the Department of Justice where U.S. Attorney Peter Jongbloed allegedly told Hagel Smith that his office believed foul play likely was involved.

Attorney Michael Jones, who represents the Smith family, grilled Hagel Smith about what was said at the meeting.

Under cross-examination, Jones asked Hagel Smith, "Do you recall Mr. Jongbloed actually inter-

jecting and looking right at you and saying, 'Jennifer, we also believe there was foul play' — meaning the Department of Justice and the FBI?"

Hagel Smith said, "No, he said, 'If we didn't think there was a possibility of foul play or something, then we wouldn't be investigating this.'"

Jones continued, saying, "You don't recall him saying that they felt there was actually — that it really wasn't an accident, that there was something that happened that was more along the lines of foul play?"

Hagel Smith replied, "Well, I mean, it's kind of — because what I took from that is also the fact they said they didn't have anything pointing at somebody or in the specific direction."

Jones declined comment on that dialogue.

Hagel Smith's father, John Hagel, said Monday the FBI told his family they believe it is a 50/50 scenario whether Smith died of foul play or from an accident.

"The FBI and the U.S. attorney's office are not going to commit to an opinion either way," Hagel said. "They are on the fence, that's what we were told. At the same time, they have not been able to provide us any evidence of foul play."

However, Jones said the Smith family is certain their son was killed.

"The Smith family believes there was foul play," Jones said. "The FBI investigation is open and active, which means they must believe it was more than an accident."

After Smith's disappearance, a divide formed be-

tween the two families, particularly after Hagel Smith accepted a \$1.1 million settlement with the cruise line, which the probate court upheld despite an outcry from Smith's family, who claimed their son was worth more. The Smith family has alleged that Hagel Smith rushed to settle to avoid embarrassing details coming to light about her behavior the night Smith vanished.

Hagel's family said the probate court validated their daughter's settlement, noting it was reasonable. An appeal of the probate court's decision is pending in state Superior Court in Stamford.

"The Smiths continue to let their emotions cloud facts in this case that cannot be disputed," Hagel said. "The Smiths will not even consider the possibility that George's use of prescription drugs and alcohol could have played a role in his death."

Jones pointed out that the Hagels have no evidence Smith was using prescription drugs, as evidenced by their testimony.

While the FBI has not released any information pertaining to their investigation, as is customary for the agency, Jones said his clients are hopeful that justice will prevail.

"The Smith family is very grateful for the work the FBI and Department of Justice have done in the case," Jones said. "We are very hopeful their continued good work will result in them identifying George's killer."

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