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Teens' deaths linked to a chain of errors

Inquiry says cell phone use may have been factor

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CANANDAIGUA — Driver inexperience, speed, driver error and possible distraction all contributed to the June 26 collision that claimed the lives of five Perinton teens, an investigation has found.

Less than three minutes before the fatal crash, a phone call and text messages were sent and received from the cell phone of Bailey Goodman, the driver of the Chevrolet TrailBlazer that veered into the path of an oncoming tractor-trailer on Routes 5 and 20 in East Bloomfield, according to the Ontario County Sheriff's Department.

Sheriff Philip C. Povero said at a news conference Friday morning that he could not be sure Goodman was using the phone to send or receive the text messages. Her phone was never found. However, sheriff's investigator Matthew McDonald said Goodman had been talking on the phone to a friend who was driving the car following her to her family's cottage on Keuka Lake.

Goodman, 17, was driving with a junior driver's license — which prohibits being on the road past 9 p.m. — when she lost control of her SUV after passing a car near the intersection of Route 64 shortly after 10 p.m. She and her four passengers, Hannah Congdon, 18, Meredith McClure, 17, Sara Monnat, 18, and Katherine "Katie" Shirley, 18, died from injuries in the collision, not from the ensuing fire.

Investigators said both the driver of the tractor-trailer and of the car Goodman passed made attempts to prevent the accident.

Michael Short, 21, of Honeoye, Ontario County, was driving the Mercury Sable that Goodman passed. He spotted the top of the oncoming rig over the crest of a hill as Goodman's SUV pulled alongside him on the two-lane road. To give her ample time and room to return safely to her lane, Short slowed down and pulled his car toward the right side of his lane, McDonald said.

After Goodman safely passed Short's car, she turned suddenly back into the tractor-trailer's path. She was driving at 60 mph — five miles over the posted speed limit — when she swerved. Povero said Goodman may have been overcompensating for an unfamiliar response from the SUV.

Seeing Goodman's car cross the double yellow lines into his lane, tractor-trailer driver David M. Laverty, 50, of Olean, Cattaraugus County, hit the brakes and pulled his rig to the right in an effort to avoid the crash, Povero said.

Laverty's truck left more than 120 feet of skid marks before the collision. Laverty was traveling the speed limit when he braked, but sheriff's investigators could not determine how much he had slowed before the front end of his truck slammed into the passenger side of the TrailBlazer.

The momentum of the truck propelled both vehicles forward more than 130 feet before stopping.

Spilled diesel fuel from the tractor-trailer's ruptured fuel lines ignited. Flames engulfed the vehicles. Laverty escaped unharmed and attempted to assist the teens, but he was driven back by the flames.

A data recorder that could have provided investigators additional information about Goodman's SUV in the moments before the crash was destroyed in the fire. Povero said investigators may never know precisely why Goodman swerved back into the tractor-trailer's path.

The investigation ruled out mechanical failure, weather, road conditions and alcohol use as contributing factors. Povero said he does not expect that toxicology tests will show any presence of drugs.

The young women, who had all graduated from Fairport High School just five days before the crash, were going to the Goodman family's cottage. Four classmates of the victims, who had been following Goodman, witnessed the crash.

McDonald said the driver of the second car, Riley Hall, 18, had a brief cell phone conversation with Goodman at 10:04 p.m. He did not know what the young women discussed.

At 10:05 p.m., Goodman's phone was used to send a text message to a friend who lived in the Canandaigua area. A response to that message was received at 10:06 p.m.

After the accident, the first call to 911 came at 10:07 p.m. from Elizabeth Corsaro, 17, of Bloomfield, a passenger in Short's vehicle.

The investigation details provide some closure, but no comfort to the families of the teens.

"To me, it was just an accident involving a group of girls who were having wholesome fun," said Ray McClure, father of Meredith McClure.

The investigation brought to light important facts, countering rumors such as one that Short somehow contributed to the crash. McClure also said he feels particularly bad for Goodman's parents, whose own grief might be compounded with the knowledge that their daughter was driving and the young women were going to their cottage.

But as far as he's concerned, Goodman's family shouldn't worry about those things.

"As much as I want my daughter back, I never felt one ounce of anger," he said. "Some people want to blame somebody. We just want to somehow find something positive in all this."

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Includes reporting by staff writer Patrick Flanigan.



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