



August 5, 2009

Wrong-way driver in crash that killed 8 was drunk, high

FRANK ELTMAN
The Associated Press

GARDEN CITY — A mother drank vodka and smoked marijuana while taking a vanload of children home from a weekend camping trip that ended in disaster when she went the wrong way on a highway and crashed into an SUV, killing eight people, police said yesterday.

Diane Schuler, who died along with her 2-year-old daughter and three nieces in her red minivan, had more than 10 drinks of alcohol in her system and a high level of the main ingredient in marijuana, authorities said. A broken 1.75-liter bottle of Absolut vodka was found in her wrecked minivan, police said.

The revelations from the 36-year-old Long Island woman's autopsy helped explain how the woman her family called "an accomplished working mother who always put her children before any other priorities" wound up driving the wrong way for nearly two miles on a suburban parkway before slamming into the SUV.

The July 26 crash on the Taconic State Parkway, about 35 miles northwest of New York City, also killed three men in the SUV. Schuler's 5-year-old son, in her minivan, survived.

Investigators said Schuler had been driving erratically on other upstate roads before getting on the highway for the 140-mile trip home.

Schuler's blood-alcohol level was well above the legal limit, and she still had undigested alcohol in her stomach, State Police Maj. William Carey said Tuesday.

Blood tests also showed she had smoked marijuana 15 minutes to an hour before the crash, said Betsy Spratt, chief toxicologist for the Westchester County medical examiner.

"With that level of alcohol ... she would have had difficulty with perception, with her judgment, with her memory," Spratt said. "You start to get what we call tunnel vision."

Police said no criminal charges were planned in the case.

Roseann Guzzo, whose father and brother were killed in the SUV, said yesterday that her family wanted to meet with prosecutors to discuss the case.

"We're outraged by it," she said. "It's a choice she made. And that choice she made to us is like she committed murder."

State police have been investigating why Schuler, who was a regular upstate campground visitor, would have been driving toward her home the wrong way on a highway she had driven many times before.

Toxicology reports found the businesswoman's blood-alcohol level was 0.19, more than twice the state's legal limit of 0.08, Carey said. She also had 6 grams of undigested alcohol in her stomach, Carey said.

Schuler's husband, Daniel, told investigators that everything seemed fine when he and his wife left the Sullivan County campground at about 9:30 a.m. on the morning of the crash. He went on a fishing trip while his wife headed home with the children, stopping at a McDonald's on the way, police said.

Her brother, the father of the three girls who died, said she called him about a half-hour before the wreck sounding disoriented and saying she didn't feel well.

Schuler's 8-year-old niece also spoke briefly with her father from the highway. The woman's cell phone was later found abandoned at a rest stop.

Witnesses said they saw Schuler's minivan straddling two lanes and tailgating, with its headlights flashing and horn beeping.

Others saw the vehicle veering from one lane to another, and one witness said it appeared as if she was attempting to pass him on the shoulder of the highway.

Another witness said the van drove across a grass divider at a service area.

Six drivers called 911 before the collision, which happened after Schuler drove 1.7 miles south in the parkway's northbound lane.

An attorney who served as a family spokesman at funerals last week did not immediately return a telephone message left by The Associated Press yesterday.

Floral Park village police blocked access to the home of Schuler's brother and said no one was there to comment. There was no answer when a reporter knocked on the door of the Schuler family home in West Babylon.

Neither Schuler's husband nor extended family has spoken with reporters about the crash. The families issued a statement last week calling Schuler "a devoted mother to her children, Bryan and Erin."

"She was a constant, doting presence in her nieces' lives, and our extended family admired her competence, ease with children and sense of humor," it said. "Never has there been a more responsible and trusted friend or caregiver."
