

Charges upgraded in triple-fatal crash

Teen who was driving is arraigned chained to a hospital bed

BY ANDREW SMITH
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A Bellport teen pleaded not guilty Thursday from his hospital bed to increased charges stemming from a crash that killed three people after prosecutors say the driver was fleeing from police in a stolen car.

Nahriek Belford, 17, hit 106 mph on Middle Country Road in Middle Island before he hit a Honda CRV, cutting it in half, on Feb. 9, Assistant District Attorney Jacob DeLauter said. The impact killed the couple in the Honda, Jerome Weingarten, 74, and his wife, Randee Weingarten, 71, and also killed Belford's brother, Angelo Belford, 19. Another of Belford's passengers, Jaquelle Funderburke, 16, was seriously injured.

Belford is now charged with four counts of first-degree assault, three counts of second-degree manslaughter, unlawful fleeing of a police officer, criminal possession of stolen property and other charges. He faces a maximum of 25 years in prison if convicted. He was originally charged only with reckless endangerment.

DeLauter said police followed Belford after he ran a stop sign in Yaphank, and determined that the 2015 Nissan Rogue he was driving was stolen, and the license plates on it were stolen from another car. DeLauter said Belford belongs to the Bloods street gang's Natural Born Killers subset.

"The defendant had no intention of stopping for any law enforcement officer," DeLauter said. Belford's speed increased to dangerous levels as he turned onto Middle Country Road, repeatedly crossing into oncoming traffic until he hit the Weingartens' Honda as it tried to turn left into an apartment complex. The impact was four minutes

after police first saw him. Thursday, Belford sat silently in his bed at Peconic Bay Medical Center during his arraignment, his right ankle chained to the bed. The arraignment was delayed by hospital officials concerned about reporters violating Belford's medical privacy rights, but state Supreme Court Justice Fernando Camacho insisted that three reporters present view the court proceeding.

DeLauter said he would consent to keeping bail set at \$250,000 cash or \$500,000 bond, as it was after Belford's arrest.

Defense attorney Lani Houston of the Suffolk Legal Aid Society said her client "vehemently denies" any gang membership and asked for lower bail so that he could get better medical care.

"He is obviously not a flight risk, as he can't even walk," she said. "His hip had to be put back together."

Camacho said DeLauter's bail request was reasonable.

The facts in this case echoed that of Jamel Turner, 25, who pleaded guilty Wednesday to assault and aggravated vehicular homicide for killing five people on Feb. 14, 2018, while fleeing police in a stolen car, also on Middle Country Road.

"I think there's a larger investigation that needs to take place in regard with police pursuits," Houston said afterward.

District Attorney Timothy Sini, however, disagreed. "Three people are dead because of the actions of the defendant," he said. "The police encounter is not relevant. The defendant is responsible for the horrific events that resulted."

Turner originally was charged with second-degree murder, but Sini said Belford's actions did not quite rise to that level. He noted that Turner was high on marijuana, drove 154 mph — much faster than Belford's 106 mph on the same road — and was begged by his passenger to slow down before his crash.

"We will bring all appropriate charges" in such cases, Sini said. "We will not overcharge. We will not undercharge."

COPS: AIDE STOLE \$31G FROM CLIENT, 84

An East Rockaway health care aide stole from her 84-year-old client by forging her signature on 110 checks, Nassau County police said in announcing her arrest Wednesday.

Nancy Cook, 45, wrote out about \$31,000 in checks to herself between September and January and cashed them, police said. The victim also lives in East Rockaway, police said.

Cook, of Atlantic Avenue, was ar-

rested Wednesday and arraigned on third-degree grand larceny and second-degree possession of a forged instrument, police said.

She was held pending a bail of \$10,000 bond or \$2,500 cash. A temporary order of protection was issued against her.

No defense attorney information was available in court records.

— ELLEN YAN

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