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Grieving mom supports husband after child's death

By Sean Rossman;, Democrat staff writer; 12 a.m. EST January 23, 2014

Cara Courson is standing by her husband. No matter what.

The Monticello woman was driving to the Jefferson County Jail on Wednesday morning for her husband David Courson's first appearance in court after he was charged in the death of the couple's 6-year-old daughter, Rebecca.

Rebecca was killed when a 13-year-old girl, with Courson, 38, as a passenger, backed over her with Courson's 2011 Nissan Frontier Monday night at the family's home. Courson was arrested on a charge of manslaughter by Florida Highway Patrol troopers that night.

Investigators say Courson was the only adult present and there's suspicion he, the 13-year-old driver and his 12-year-old daughter, may have been drinking.

While en route to the jail Wednesday, Cara Courson adamantly defended her husband, who she described as a caring and good father.

"I'm worried because he should be with his family," she said. "He should not be charged with anything. He needs to be with his kids. He lost a daughter, too."

But bond conditions imposed Wednesday by County Judge Robert Plaines mean Courson won't be able to see his two other children at

least for now. He was placed under a \$350,000 bond and ordered to have no contact with any minors, including his 12-year-old daughter and 8-year-old son, both of whom were at the home the night Rebecca died.

“It’s just beyond ridiculous but it is what it is and we’re trying to figure it out,” she said of the bond conditions.

Courson may have contact with his wife but is not allowed within 500 feet of his home. He was ordered to have no alcohol or drugs and must undergo a breath test three times a week.

“I told him I love him, and we’re there for him,” Cara said after the hearing. She had not spoken to her husband since he was arrested.

“He said that he loved me and he’s just hopeful that we can get him free.”

Tallahassee defense attorney Tim Jansen is representing Courson and said he believes his client will be exonerated based on what he’s heard about the facts of the case.

“Mr. Courson is absolutely, 100-percent not guilty of any offense,” Jansen told the Democrat on Wednesday after meeting with Courson at the Jefferson County Jail. “Our feeling right now is that this is a tragedy, not a crime.”

Courson is devastated, said Jansen, but knows the truth will come out. He is a lifelong Jefferson County resident with family and land in the county. He works for the Florida Department of Environmental Protection and served two years in the military before being medically discharged due to a heart condition, Jansen said.

Either today or Friday, Jansen said he will file a motion to lower Courson’s bond amount and will ask the court to allow him to see his two children.

Rebecca was playing hide-and-seek at the family’s home on St. Augustine Road in Jefferson County on Monday evening when she was killed, Cara Courson said.

According to Florida Highway Patrol investigators, the 13-year-old girl, along with Courson and his 8-year-old son, were all in the truck that night. Rebecca was hit with the rear tires when the 13-year-old girl backed the truck up to move it to a different part of the property.

Once the car was parked, Courson discovered Rebecca had been hit. FHP troopers were called to the house at 5:27 p.m.

Many have expressed concern that a 13-year-old, perhaps under the influence of alcohol, was able to drive a truck under the supervision of an adult. But details released Tuesday suggest more may have been going on at the Courson house that night.

When an FHP trooper arrived, he found alcohol and marijuana in the front of the truck. More alcohol was in a cooler on the home's front porch, according to the FHP arrest report.

Sgt. Aaron Stephens, FHP spokesman, said alcohol could be smelled on the girls. Courson, who was not tested, may have been under the influence as well, he said.

The 13-year-old girl gave a blood sample that night. The results may not be known for weeks, Stephens said.

Jansen told another story Wednesday, saying Courson was not a passenger but actually attempted to stop the 13-year-old from driving by actually jumping in the truck.

"Evidence is going to show he did not let the 13-year-old behind the wheel," Jansen said. "He was trying to stop her from driving the vehicle."

The marijuana found in the truck was not Courson's, Jansen said.

"If there was any marijuana anywhere, it was not his," Jansen said. "He did not provide any illegal substances to anyone."

Jansen said the FHP investigation was done "rather quickly" and that more needs to be found out.

"Right now the facts really aren't out there, what we have is a one-

page report, a bunch of innuendo, a bunch of inferences,” Jansen said.

Courson’s arrest was “haphazard” he said, since drug and alcohol testing had yet to be completed.

Jansen said he does not believe Courson has been tested for drugs or alcohol and that others at the scene may not have been tested either.

“I did get information that some tests were not done to some people there. That concerns me,” Jansen said.

Jansen thinks the blood results of the 13-year-old girl who was driving will be “important” but he declined to comment as to why. He added he’s still investigating why the 13-year-old was driving in the first place.

A nightmare

Cara Courson described what her family is going through as a nightmare. Her husband and children are unable to see each other, and he is behind bars for the death of the other.

“He’s unable to grieve properly,” she said.

People hearing of the story in the news are unfairly passing judgment on her husband, she said. More people need to be questioned, she added.

“Everyone thinks he did it out of cruelty,” the mother said. “He’s the best father in the world. He loves his daughter with all his heart.”

Jansen said as the facts come out, public opinion will turn to favor his client.

“You look at that report and it looks terrible, you hear 13-year-old, you hear alcohol, you hear drugs, a baby died, that’s the worst facts you could have,” Jansen said. “You’re going to see that Mr. Courson and

his family have suffered a tragedy and that he's the victim."

Cara Courson would not comment on the use of alcohol mentioned by investigators and maintains her husband was a loving and caring father.

"I just think this is a sad, tragic accident," she said Wednesday. "Poor choices definitely were made."

Cara Courson broke down in tears when she relived the moment she found out her youngest child had died. While on her way home from work, she got a call from her husband, but she could not make out the words.

Courson's father took the phone from him and explained to her what had happened. By the time she got home, the ambulance was gone.

"I didn't get to see my baby," she said. Rebecca was pronounced dead, just more than an hour after FHP troopers arrived, at 6:29 p.m.

"There's no words to say how somebody reacts at that point," she said. "The reaction was disbelief."

According to the arrest report, the family's front yard laid out the tragedy. There was a pool of blood where Rebecca was hit, along with a "blood-like fluid" on the left rear tire of the truck.

While at the home, Courson was questioned by police. He gave a sworn statement and was taken to the Jefferson County Jail that night.

"Being that Courson was the only adult present at the residence, he was directly responsible for the supervision and care of the four children," the arrest report read. "By allowing two juveniles to consume alcoholic beverages, while in the presence of illegal narcotics, while in his care, constitutes negligence."

Cara Courson, less than 48 hours after the death of her daughter, showed remorse for her older daughter's friend, the one who was driving the truck that night.

“Of course I’m upset with how things have turned out,” Cara said. “My daughter is dead.”

“Do I dislike her? Do I hate her? But I forgive her,” she said of the teenager.

Cara hasn’t had the opportunity to talk with the girl or her family, but would like to. “At some point I would love to talk to them because they’re going through a whirlwind and a roller coaster too,” she said.

Peas in a pod

Rebecca was a first-grade student at Jefferson Elementary who loved music, dancing, princesses and Barbies, her mother said.

“She was so smart,” Courson said. “She loved to play dress. She was just an all around princess. She loved those things.

Courson said she did not know what her daughter aspired to be but believes she may have had a career in music.

“I’m sure it would have had something to do with music,” Courson said. “She loved to dance and sing. She loved to use her voice.”

The song “Stuck Like Glue” by the country duo Sugarland was a song she shared with her dad.

“They were like two peas in a pod, they were so close,” she remembered.

Investigation continues

The investigation is ongoing as investigators learn more details of what occurred Monday evening. Questions remain as to the drugs and alcohol present.

“What we’re waiting on is for the investigation to be complete. Once

it's complete, we'll make all the other decisions," said State Attorney for the Second Judicial Circuit Willie Meggs.

The 13-year-old driver has not been charged.

Assistant State Attorney John Wilson, who is prosecuting in this case, could not say whether Courson may face more charges.

"We're still very deep in working it out," Wilson said. "Once the investigation is concluded they'll see whether they'll do more charges."

The Florida Department of Children and Families has opened its own investigation. They're working with FHP, the lead investigating agency.

"From a DCF standpoint, we are still assessing the situation, but we do want to note that all the surviving children are safe and we have no prior involvement with the family," DaMonica Rivas, Northwest Region communications director for DCF, said Wednesday.

While law enforcement tries to sort out what happened, Cara stands with her husband.

"Me and David, we're going through a lot," she said. "That was his baby. It was our last child. It was our baby."

"Things happen, it takes a split moment to turn your back," she said. "It's tragic, but accidents do happen."

"The only thing I know is she's with her Lord," Cara said. "She's in a better place."

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