

OFFICE OF THE DISTRICT ATTORNEY
BLUE RIDGE JUDICIAL CIRCUIT



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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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**Acworth Man Pleads Guilty and Receives Sentence
For Homicide by Vehicle in the First Degree and Possession of a Controlled Substance**

State vs. Paul Allen Barnes

November 30, 2020 – During a court hearing this morning, Paul Allen Barnes, 28, pled guilty to homicide by vehicle in the first degree (2 counts), possession of more than an ounce of marijuana, driving under the influence, reckless driving, and other charges. Judge Tony Baker sentenced him to 20 years with the first 5 years to be served in confinement.

The charges relate to an April 13, 2018 vehicular homicide in Acworth. At approximately 11:50 p.m. that night, Barnes lost control of his Jeep Wrangler while traveling westbound on Highway 92 at speeds estimated at 70 mph. The vehicle ran off the highway near Bryon Road, then rolled, ejecting both Barnes and his 22-year-old girlfriend, Jerry Nikkole Acklin. Neither occupants were wearing seatbelts. Acklin sustained critical injuries and died six days later.

The defendant admitted to law enforcement that he had smoked marijuana earlier in the day and had one drink several hours prior to the accident. Investigation by law enforcement determined that he was impaired and in possession of approximately 37 grams of marijuana located inside the wrecked vehicle.

“On this fateful day, the defendant made a series of bad decisions. He smoked marijuana, drank alcohol, and drove recklessly at high speeds, causing him to lose control of his vehicle,” said Deputy Chief Assistant District Attorney Randall Ivey, who prosecuted the case on behalf of the state. “Anger may have also played a factor since witnesses reported seeing the defendant argue with Ms. Acklin, then ‘burn rubber’ as he took off from a Kroger parking lot just moments before the accident.”

During the in-person hearing, 10 witnesses spoke and one issued a statement to be read to the court.

Ms. Acklin’s family and friends described the pain of losing a special person at such a young age. She was described as breathtakingly beautiful, intelligent, accomplished, goal-oriented, and much loved. Her parents devoted their lives to her and are struggling to move forward.

After six witnesses testified for the defense, the defendant spoke on his own behalf. He admitted to making bad decisions that day and apologized to the victim’s family. He said he was ready to accept the weight of his actions.

The State recommended a sentence of 20 years, with 7 to serve in confinement, 240 hours of community service, and other conditions. Defense attorney Archie Speights proposed a sentence of 15 years to serve on probation.

While deliberating, Judge Baker said the court must consider the proper punishment when a person consciously drinks then gets in a vehicle to drive and is also under the influence of THC. He acknowledged that many people are grieving.

Judge Baker then sentenced the defendant to 20 years with the first 5 years to serve in state prison. The defendant was also ordered to have no contact with members of the victim's family, unless they choose to contact him.

After considering the intoxicating substances that played a factor in this case, Judge Baker advised the defendant to avail himself of treatment options available in prison so that he can overcome any substance abuse problems and ensure that he never repeats these mistakes.

"It is heartbreaking to see the pain of a grieving family, especially when this accident could have easily been avoided had the defendant exercised better judgement," said District Attorney Shannon Wallace. "While nothing can bring back this young woman to her family, hopefully this case will serve to remind people of the dangers associated with driving under the influence."

The Office of the District Attorney for the Blue Ridge Judicial Circuit is committed to seeking justice, acting with integrity, and collaborating with partner agencies in the criminal justice system in order to protect the citizens of Cherokee County and the State of Georgia.

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