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Business

Arts/Entertainment

Columnists

Obituaries

Religion

Daily Log

Home » Latest News » Accidents/Vehicular »

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Index



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Article published Saturday, March 12, 2005

Driver who hit fire truck uninsured North Toledo woman has 5 traffic cases pending

By **CHRISTINA HALL**
BLADE STAFF WRITER

A North Toledo woman whose car collided with a city fire engine, injuring herself and four firefighters and totalling the rig, was driving without insurance.

Mercedes McDuffey, 20, of 1025 Homer St. was cited yesterday for failure to yield to an emergency vehicle for the crash Thursday in central Toledo. Although her driver's license is valid, she had four prior suspensions for noncompliance for failing to show proof of insurance to the state, Toledo police Officer Dave McClellan said.

Toledo Municipal Court records show she has five pending 2004 traffic cases, including speeding, driving with a suspended license, use of fictitious license plates, and failure to display license plates.

A police check of her cell phone record showed she was not using the phone when the collision with engine No. 7 occurred at Ashland Avenue and Bancroft Street. Ms. McDuffey, who is unemployed, did use the phone to call 911 after the accident, Officer McClellan said.

City officials are uncertain what they will do about replacing the engine, which slammed into a pole and a tree after the collision. Deputy Fire Chief Bob Metzger said Ms. McDuffey's car hit the engine in just the right spot to cause the accident.

"She hit a vulnerable part of the rig," he said.

Ms. McDuffey, who had the green light westbound on Bancroft, pulled over at Ashland for a westbound heavy rescue squad that was responding to a fire. She didn't see or hear the engine that followed and pulled away from the curb. The wheel of the engine collided with her car, which hooked onto the truck's step-up

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area and moved with the rig about 15 feet, Officer McClellan said.

Her rear passenger tire then hit a curb, knocking her car off the engine. Her car shot across the eastbound lane and the engine continued westbound without steering or brakes.

"They were like a rocket going down the street," Officer McClellan said. "One of the [firefighters] said the steering wheel was just spinning."

Chief Metzger said authorities speculate that when the collision occurred, the engine's steering linkage separated behind the wheels, impairing the driver's ability to steer the rig. The front axle collapsed, went under the rig, and tore the air line for the air brakes, the chief speculated.

He said the engine had no mechanical problems and was checked recently during regularly scheduled maintenance.

Eleven-year firefighter Lt. Michael Duran and Matt Viertlbeck, a nearly five-year firefighter whose father was battling the blaze to which he was en route when the crash occurred, were released yesterday from St. Vincent Mercy Medical Center. Both declined interviews.

Tom Marciniak, a 30-year veteran and respected rig driver, and Brian Schoen, a 14-year firefighter, were released from the hospital Thursday. Neither they nor Ms. McDuffey, who was treated at Toledo Hospital, could be reached for comment.

Like many of his colleagues, Lt. Mike Maraldo of station No. 5 downtown thought the worst when he arrived at the scene.

"It's usually the other way around, the vehicle's destroyed and the fire truck has minor damage. I don't know that anybody was prepared for what they saw on that scene," he said.

Nonetheless, rookies to veterans did what they were trained to do and did it under the most adverse conditions - multiple victims, downed power lines, puddles of diesel fuel, a smoking engine, and a large crowd.

A firefighter held Mr. Marciniak, who stood on a seat in the rig and held Lieutenant Duran in his arms as other firefighters freed his pinned leg.


"The second rig notoriously is the more dangerous rig to be in. People assume when [the] first truck passes there are no more. [Fire] drivers expect that," he said. "But it's very rare we don't travel in packs."

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