

Police say driver in fatal accident was texting

By KYLE HOPKINS

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The 19-year-old charged in a fatal Anchorage hit-and-run had been texting on her iPhone when her car struck and killed a village man on Easter Sunday, police say.

"OMG OMG OMG," Ashley Nichole Bashore texted to a friend shortly after the crash that knocked pedestrian Hubert Tunuchuk, 28, out of his shoes and into the intersection, according to paperwork filed Thursday by state prosecutors.

Instead of stopping or calling 911, prosecutors say, Bashore drove to a friend's house where she said her SUV had "hit a mangy Rottweiler without a collar."

Arrested Wednesday night following a months-long investigation, Bashore pleaded not guilty Thursday to three felonies: Criminally negligent homicide, leaving the scene of an accident and tampering with evidence.

The tampering charge stems from Bashore's attempt to delete text messages sent in the days after the April 24 collision, prosecutors say.

Bashore entered the courtroom in tears, attempting to hide her face with shackled hands. A bailiff warned a distraught woman in the gallery to stop trying to communicate with Bashore, who sat sobbing at the end of a line of prisoners. She pulled her prison shirt to her face, her fingernails painted a soft green.

Several of Tunuchuk's family members watched from the back of the room.

"Everybody's affected by what happened. Her family. My family. Everyone involved," said his aunt, Esther Stauffer. "I just feel so sorry for her. She's so young. If she had made the right choice when that happened, then perhaps we wouldn't be here today."

Esther's husband, Geoffrey, said he feels sorry for the 19-year-old too. But he's also angry.

"I feel like maybe she's just scared for herself. She tried to hide this and we lived the last six months not knowing if they were ever going to be able to charge the person," Geoffrey Stauffer said.

The village of Chefornak, a Yup'ik community of about 400 people in Western Alaska, sent Tunuchuk to the state vocational-technical school in Seward to study power plant operations. He was in Anchorage on April 24 with friends to celebrate Easter and planned to stay at the Stauffers' house, the couple said.

Early Sunday morning, Tunuchuk was intoxicated and walking behind two friends westbound on the Tudor Road overpass above the Seward Highway, according to a document filed by prosecutors. Had he been driving, his blood-alcohol level would have been above the legal limit, said traffic

investigator Michael Busey.

Tunuchuk was in the roadway, near the narrow sidewalk curb of the overpass, according to prosecutors. A Hyundai Sante Fe driven by Bashore approached heading eastbound, prosecutors say.

As Bashore came across the overpass, the front of the SUV struck Tunuchuk on the passenger side, prosecutors say. Tunuchuk was thrown into the intersection where the Seward Highway off-ramp meets Tudor. Busey could not say how far he traveled. At some point before or after the collision, the Sante Fe drove up onto the curb, the investigator said.

Someone called 911 at about 3:15 a.m. to report the incident, police said at the time.

Tunuchuk survived for about three hours, according to police.

"We thought at first he was going to make it. ... Unfortunately he just lost too much blood," said Geoffrey Stauffer, who along with his wife placed a cross at the scene of the crash. It's still there.

Police say Bashore fled the scene, driving to a friend's house and telling the story of hitting a dog. She smelled of marijuana following the accident, according to the police investigation. But Busey said there's no way to determine whether she was high the night of the collision.

Police had few leads at first, prosecutors said, but a piece of trim from the Sante Fe and a Crimestoppers tip soon led police to the vehicle. While Bashore is not the registered owner of the SUV, she drove it on a regular basis, Busey said.

Police seized Bashore's iPhone, finding that all texts sent before April 26, two days after the collision, had been deleted, according to prosecutors and police. A review of her phone records revealed Bashore was "likely texting immediately before or at the time of the collision," according to paperwork filed by prosecutors.

Bashore eventually told a friend that she had hit a person and did so because she was texting, according to the prosecutor's memo.

A profile for Bashore appears on exploretalent.com, a website where hopeful performers post resumes and photos. She wants to be a model and once appeared in a horror movie filmed in the Butte, the profile says. "I enjoy swimming, biking, instant messaging and texting with friends," the profile says.

An Anchorage grand jury handed up the three-count indictment of Bashore on Wednesday -- more than seven months after the hit-and-run. Busey and another traffic investigator arrested Bashore on Wednesday night at her home in West Anchorage, a police spokesman said.

Efforts to establish details of the crash, along with DNA testing, the phone seizure and review by prosecutors all contributed to the length of the investigation, Busey said.

"Putting it all together just takes time, unfortunately," he said.

Before her arrest in the hit-and-run, Bashore had no criminal record as an adult. Three months after the collision that killed Tunuchuk, she was ticketed for speeding more than 20 mph over the speed limit, court records show.

Tunuchuk was about two weeks from graduating from the power plant operations training, his aunt said. He had planned to spend a couple of months fishing in Bristol Bay before returning to the

village, she said.

Bashore's bail was set at \$2,500 cash with a court-ordered third-party custodian required for release, a police spokesman said. Bashore is also forbidden from driving while on bail, he said.

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