



Office of the District Attorney Stanislaus County

Birgit Fladager
District Attorney

Assistant District Attorney
Jeffrey M. Laugero

Chief Deputies
Marlisa Ferreira
Wendell Emerson
Michael D. Houston
Mark Zahner

Bureau of Investigation
Chief Terry L. Seese

PRESS RELEASE

For Immediate Release

Date: May 27, 2022
Re: Manpreet Singh Atwal
DUI Murder Conviction

For More Information Contact:

John Goold, Public Information Liaison
Phone: (209) 525-6909

Modesto, California- Stanislaus County District Attorney Birgit Fladager announced today that Manpreet Singh Atwal, age 32, of Modesto was convicted following a jury trial on May 26, 2022 of murder and other serious felony charges in a drunk driving crash that killed 83-year-old Hubertina Koch and seriously injured two others. Deputy District Attorney Vita Palazuelos prosecuted the case on behalf of the People.

On January 21, 2017, at approximately 4:20 a.m., California Highway Patrol (CHP) officers responded to a reported collision on Highway 99 south of Crows Landing Road. A motorhome had overturned on its left side on the steep embankment of the freeway just north of a second vehicle, a white Honda.

Inside the motorhome, emergency crews located 83-year-old Hubertina Koch, her husband, Frederick, and their son, William. Hubertina was deceased from injuries she suffered in the crash. Her husband and son were transported to a local hospital with serious injuries. Frederick Koch suffered major blunt force trauma to his head, a broken left collar bone and lacerations to both hands and arms while William suffered a broken left collar bone, a lacerated spleen, complaint of pain to his hip and minor lacerations to both arms and hands.

Frederick Koch told officers that he had been driving the motorhome northbound on Highway 99 in the number three lane using cruise control set at 60 miles per hour. Koch saw a white Honda also driving northbound approaching them at a high rate of speed. The driver of the Honda lost control and struck the left side of the motorhome, pushing them onto the shoulder where Koch lost control and the motorhome overturned. The Honda continued off the freeway through a chain link fence before coming to rest. The driver of the Honda fled the scene.

CHP Officer Matt McCain found blood on the Honda's airbag and a cell phone belonging to Manpreet Singh Atwal within the vehicle. Using the phone, McCain was able to locate Atwal and contacted him at his girlfriend's residence. Atwal claimed that his vehicle had been stolen and that he had been with his girlfriend since 1:00 a.m. that morning. Despite being confronted with the fact that his phone was still in the vehicle and he had the Honda's key fob in his possession, Atwal stuck with his story that the vehicle had been stolen.

Officer McCain observed that Atwal showed obvious signs of alcohol intoxication and was unable to successfully complete a series of field sobriety tests. McCain determined that Atwal was under the influence of alcohol and arrested him. A subsequent chemical test showed Atwal's blood alcohol concentration to be 0.11% and 0.12%.

CHP investigators were able to download data from the Airbag Control Module of the Honda that showed Atwal was driving between 96 to 99 miles per hour just seconds prior to the crash. GPS mapping software showed his phone traveling to a north Modesto bar and other locations throughout the night, contradicting his story that the Honda had been stolen.

A Modesto Police detective who examined the data from Atwal's phone testified that just hours before the accident Atwal sent a text message to his girlfriend saying he was "drunk." Atwal also made over 20 phone calls to the girlfriend during a 10-minute time frame prior to the crash. Atwal's phone also contained photos of him drinking from a red Solo cup at 2:00 a.m. that same morning at a house party.

In 2012 in Sacramento County, Atwal was convicted of a driving under the influence related offense where he was ordered to take DUI classes. The director from that school testified Atwal completed those classes and learned about the dangers of driving impaired.

After the close of the prosecution's case, Atwal took the stand and testified on his own behalf. He admitted driving the Honda at the time of the accident and said he fled the scene because he was scared. Atwal testified he did not remember how fast he was traveling and lost control of the vehicle due to cell phone use. When questioned about his sobriety, Atwal claimed he only drank Dr. Pepper in the red Solo cup and consumed alcohol after fleeing the collision scene.

At the conclusion of the three-week trial, a Stanislaus County Superior Court jury convicted Atwal of the following felony charges: second-degree murder, gross vehicular manslaughter while intoxicated, driving under the influence causing injury, driving with a blood alcohol level of .08% or higher and causing injury and leaving the scene of an injury accident.

Sentencing is set for June 24, 2022. Atwal faces a state prison sentence of 15 years-to-life for the murder charge plus an additional 10 years for the DUI and hit and run offenses.

The District Attorney's Office wants to thank the Modesto Police Department, Stanislaus County Sheriff's Department, Ceres Police Department, the California Department of Justice Crime Lab and units within the California Highway Patrol for their assistance in this investigation. Their participation made these convictions possible.

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