LOCAL NEWS

UPDATED | Driver found not responsible for hitting UMass alum in crosswalk

By: **Matt Rocheleau** | April 02, 2010 |

[Four portions of this story were updated between 12 and 3 p.m. on Friday, April 2. The updated sections are marked with asterisks (*****).]

Local police will not file charges against the driver of a vehicle that struck and seriously injured a recent University of Massachusetts graduate who was crossing a stretch of highway in Sunderland where at least four other pedestrians have been hit by cars in the past five years.

*****Contrary to a prior version of this story, state police are not conducting a separate investigation into the incident, meaning the driver will not face criminal charges. Sunderland police told The Collegian earlier today that state police also were investigating the accident on their own. When contacted around noontime, state police media relations did not immediately refute the claim; however, a closer look at their records indicated no such investigation was conducted nor is there one in progress, said a state police spokesman. Though state police may have responded to the scene, the spokesman said it is not typical practice that both state and local police would investigate an accident separately.

While walking on a crosswalk between the 7-Eleven and Cliffside Apartments on Route 116 in Sunderland shortly after 6 p.m. on Feb. 26, Casey Lee Patterson, 22, of Whitman, Mass., was hit by a Nissan pickup truck driven by Philip J. Rocasah, 68, of 16 Silver Lane in Sunderland, according to police.

At least two witnesses – a UMass student and an off-duty police dispatcher – said Patterson entered the crosswalk while the "do not walk" symbol was lit and the driver said that a recently installed traffic light at the crosswalk was green as his truck passed through, said a Sunderland police investigation.

That investigation found the truck was traveling less than 34 miles per hour in the 40 mph zone and that, "there are no signs of improper operation by the driver of the vehicle." *****Sunderland Police Chief Jeffrey Gilbert confirmed Friday that charges would not be filed against Rocasah.

While in a "semiconscious" state at the hospital, Patterson told police she remembered pushing the walk button before crossing the highway, but "couldn't understand why she was hit."

However, in a March 19 Facebook post, Patterson said, "Listen, the light was red when I started crossing, and the stop line next to the crosswalk is literally less than 3 feet away from it. It was impossible to notice he had crossed it until I woke up 60 ft away. He was speeding, he ran a red light through a crosswalk."

*****The police chief said nearly all of the drivers who have hit pedestrians in this area of Rte. 116 in recent years have faced charges, however "in this particular case the driver wasn't charged because the investigation did not find him to be at fault."

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- Yes
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- I don't know what Campus Pulse is.

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*Pedestrians are responsible for obeying traffic postings in the same way drivers are, he added, and walking against a "do not walk" signal is illegal. Gilbert declined to comment on why the police report said Patterson was interviewed in a "semiconscious" state several hours after she was hit but was never given a follow-up interview unlike the driver who was interviewed at the scene and again on March 2.

On Thursday, Patterson posted, "Police report found that the guy who hit me was 100% NOT at fault," and in response to more than a dozen subsequent comments expressing disappointment in the police department's decision not to file charges, Patterson responded, "My attorney is on it, don't worry."

A woman who answered the phone at Rocasah's listed address said he did not want to comment on the matter. An automated message said that the number listed for Patterson in the University's student directory "is not a working number." Messages sent Thursday to Patterson via Facebook and her student e-mail were not returned.

Patterson, who was living in the nearby Squire Village Apartments at the time and, according to her Facebook graduated from UMass in 2009, was carried on the truck's hood for around 40 feet until the vehicle stopped. She was thrown from the hood causing her to tumble around 50 feet further, said the police report written by the responding officer, Joshua S. Harris.

She was transported to Baystate Medical Center in Springfield and suffered multiple fractures to her vertebrae, a broken left wrist and facial lacerations, the report said. According to Patterson's Facebook, she spent around two weeks in rehab at the Bronson Rehabilitation Center at Noble Hospital in Westfield, Mass., and appears to be recovering without any major complications.

Patterson became at least the fifth pedestrian to be hit by a vehicle along that section of Rte. 116 since Dec. 2004, according to The Springfield Republican.

Jessica Hayes, a 25-year-old UMass employee, was struck by a car and died in the Dec. 2004 accident there, according to The Republican. That car's driver was charged with vehicular homicide, but was eventually acquitted by a jury, said the Springfield-based newspaper.

Around two years later, a 56-year-old man was seriously injured there, and in Sept. 2009, two women were struck by a pickup truck while walking in the same crosswalk as Patterson.

Following the 2009 accident, more than $2 million was spent to improve the safety conditions on that section of Rte. 116, according to The Republican. Reducing the speed limit from 45 to 40 mph, installing a traffic light, improving sidewalk conditions and building a pedestrian island were among the changes made there.

With apartment complexes and bus stops on either side of the highway, along with a shopping plaza that includes a 7-Eleven, a liquor store, a pizza shop and a Dunkin' Donuts on one side, the area can see heavy pedestrian traffic from local residents and college students alike.

Matt Rocheleau can be reached at mrochele@dailycollegian.com.

14 Responses to "UPDATED | Driver found not responsible for hitting UMass alum in crosswalk"

orange_cone says:
April 2, 2010 at 6:42 am
Accountability is with both parties. Everyone should have been paying attention.

The driver should have been paying better attention. I've lived in Sunderland for years and know this location quite well. Every competent driver knows when you see a light and/or crosswalk you should use caution. Let alone when going through such an area that cautious speed and behavior are essential.

Casey should have been paying attention moreover. Why would someone just walk into the road where a vehicle is still in motion. Its called common sense and what our parents teach us when crossing the street.

A walkway over or under the street would alleviate these situations. It is just too bad that it takes incidents such as this for it to be realized.

huh says:
April 2, 2010 at 10:12 am
does that make sense? can you hit a person that far w/o going faster then 34? that really doesnt sound right

and um green lights dont mean 'oh hey i can just hit this person'

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What says:
April 2, 2010 at 11:25 am
I am with Huh on this one. You can't go that far at 34 mph after hitting the breaks. Not to mention she was hit on the far side of the road, meaning the driver had to have seen her well ahead of time, if he was paying attention. And if he was paying atention and going 34 he could have stopped. I call foul on the Police in this one, granted they are known for not properly investigating things.

Rob says:
April 2, 2010 at 11:31 am
I also agree with Huh. My ex girlfriend was hit a few years ago by a car going 45 in a 25. The woman driving hit the brakes only a moment before hitting her, and she still only rolled about 10 feet away from the car.

Sure, the girl should have been paying attention. But I assume that drivers are paying attention to the road in front of them when I cross a crosswalk, and I can tell you that plenty of times in the past I would have been hit if the driver kept going, as I assumed that he knew I was crossing at a crosswalk. I'd find it hard to believe if someone told me they never had that.

John says:
April 2, 2010 at 12:34 pm
"the driver said Patterson entered the crosswalk while the "do not walk" symbol was lit"

Doesn't that mean he saw her enter the crosswalk? I've been to that crosswalk. There's 3 lanes if you count the turning lane. That means this guy who was supposedly going 30something didn't see her despite the fact that she had to walk across 2 lanes of traffic and then into his before he hit her.

Matthew Jarrett says:
April 2, 2010 at 12:53 pm
I agree with orange_cone on the walkway. It's ridiculous that 2 million dollars were spent to put in a light at this intersection. It would seem that for much less you could have installed a steel pedestrian bridge.

Bob Bob says:
April 2, 2010 at 12:56 pm
Remember, this is the same police department that presented such a poor case against the guy who hit and killed someone at the crosswalk in 2004 that he was acquitted by a jury.

They also fail at math (since you aren't going to get knocked 60 feet by a vehicle moving 34).

Law enforcement incompetence is a sad, sad thing.

Matthew Jarrett says:
April 2, 2010 at 1:24 pm
In response to the distance traveled after being struck:

I have been trained as a Mechanical Engineer, but I am making no claim to the validity of these numbers. These calculations don't take into account the intricacies of where the truck stopped, how long it took to stop, where the 50′ number came from (was it measured after she left the hood or measured from the truck's final stopping position?) when the moment was that she actually left the hood, the accuracy of this news article's numbers, etc, etc. Nonetheless, these numbers are interesting think about.

A Nissan Frontier 4×4's hood is approximately 49 inches from the ground (taking the published overall height and measuring the ratio of hood height to overall height from a side-view image on Nissan's website).

I did a back-of-the-envelope calculation using the basic kinematic equation:

x = V_0*t + 0.5*a*t^2

where V_0 is the initial velocity, t is the elapsed time, and a is the acceleration experienced.

a = g = acceleration of gravity = 9.81 m/s^2
V_0 = 0 mph (initial vertical velocity is zero for free fall)

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If an object were free falling from 49 inches, it would take 0.504 seconds to hit the ground by:

49 inches = 0*t + 0.5*(9.81 m/s^2)*t^2

Solving for t = sqrt((49 inches)/(0.5*(9.81 m/s^2))) = 0.504 sec.

Neglecting drag due to traveling through air (which should be negligible at the speed of 34 mph), traveling horizontally at 34 mph for 0.504 seconds would leave you:

34mph*0.504 seconds = 25 feet from the point in space where the object left the hood.

I found no good metrics to estimate how far a body would tumble or slide across asphalt, so the analysis ends there.

If anyone would like to comment, correct, or build upon this in an analytic way, please do.

driver says:
April 2, 2010 at 2:31 pm
Ok so drving threw teh UMASS campus, Amherst and in Northampton all the time the students and other pedestrians feel as though they rule the road. Just because you pressed the red button to walk doesnt mean you have the right of way nor does walking threw a "do not walk" sign just because your in a cross walk. On NUMEROUS occasions I see my green light and im watching the light for it turn yellow since it is a "stale" green light and having to slam on brakes because you pedestrian feel as if you can walk whenever you feel like it. BUT then when I walk the same crosswalks, with no crossing lights, on campus to go to work there has been a number of times where one row of cars is stopped and I pass them and move on to the second row and hear the car and stop and have a student driver drive right past coming inches to hitting me. So the row of ten cars stopped wasnt a warning in its self but the fact that this student didnt slow down because there were cross walks present. We are taught from the moment we are kids to stop look and listen and in driving school we are taught to be cautious of crosswalks and pedestrians! I feel as though students believe that the world revolves around themselves and have no concern for anyone else! Many times driving threw campus I shake my head and think "no wonder you all keep getting hit!"

Bob Bob says:
April 2, 2010 at 3:01 pm
Driver, perhaps instead of spending your time insulting students, you should become one yourself. Your spelling and grammar are atrocious. I'm surprised I was able to interpret any of that nonsense.

Matthew Jarrett says:
April 2, 2010 at 3:06 pm
Driver,

I'm not going to say you are biased, but it certainly seems that way. How do you know that all of these pedestrians are students and that all of these drivers are students? Do they wear t-shirts that say "student" on them? Do they have bumper stickers or "student" painted in nail polish on the sides of their cars?

Is it true that only students drive or walk on campus? Of course not. You, yourself stated that you do both. I'd like to know how you can determine that these aren't University employees, just like yourself?

Making sweeping generalizations of people is not the appropriate way to pose an argument while still maintaining respect. Besides, if you have something to say, you should use your real name. How else is anyone supposed to assume the validity of your argument if you aren't even going to vouch for it?

Also, you should take some more time to coherently organize your argument. Microsoft Word and Mozilla Firefox both have spell check and Microsoft Word also does grammar – as all of the professors frequently remind their students.

Rob says:
April 2, 2010 at 4:23 pm
Matthew, in regards to your calculation:

The article said that he was traveling 34. I'm assuming that, unless he wasn't paying attention to the road at all, he braked before hitting her. Even if it was right before, that would lower the speed incredibly right away. After hitting her, the braking would have continued. If you brake heavily, going at a speed around 30 will stop you very fast (relatively) and considering Casey would still be "stuck" on the car, her speed would also decrease.

I think the speed with which she was thrown off would be much, much lower than 34 miles per hour. Even if she left the car at 25mph (which I personally think is a very high estimate), that's only 12.6 feet away. If she was 60 feet away, or even if she overestimated horribly and was only 30 feet away, that means she's rolling on the ground for 18 feet. At 60 feet away, that's 48 feet. That's ridiculous.

Using just your calculations without the deceleration, that could be 5 feet of rolling if she was 30 feet away or 35 feet if she landed as far as she said.

So maybe 5 feet sounds more reasonable (if she overestimated to DOUBLE the distance), but that means that if he was traveling 34 miles per hour he didn't brake at all before hitting her. What was he looking at?

Obviously there is a few other things to take into account past this simple analysis, but it doesn't seem right at all.

Matthew Jarrett says:
April 2, 2010 at 10:51 pm
Rob,

Thanks for the response. I guess I was working off of the following statistic – assumed to actually be correctly pulled from the police report (and assumed that the police report was actually correct):

"She was thrown from the hood causing her to tumble around 50 feet further, said the police report written by the responding officer, Joshua S. Harris."

and my estimation of the full speed was offering a worst-case-scenario for the distance of free-fall prior to skidding or rolling. From that, the idea was to make an estimation (as you did, yourself) of whether it was a reasonable distance to skid/roll. I'd like to find some data for how long a person would skid or roll across asphalt before coming to a stop based on initial velocities. That would make this all pretty easy to estimate the validity of all of the numbers in question.

Either way, multiple people have come to the conclusion – whether analytically, anecdotally, or by gut feeling – that 34 mph seems a bit low of a speed for a 50 ft landing distance.

Rob says:
April 2, 2010 at 11:52 pm
I would agree, Matthew.

A 25 foot tumble from 35 miles per hour (max) is ridiculous. As I said in my earlier post, a past girlfriend of mine was hit by a car going 45 mph moments before, and tumbled about 10 feet away from the car.

It bothers me that they've basically said she walked out in front of the car right as it was passing through.

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