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Man Given 6.5 Years In Crash That Killed Nogales Firefighter

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Arizona - A Tucson man was sentenced to 6 1/2 years in prison Monday for killing a Nogales firefighter in a hit-and-run crash last June. Jesus Zepeda, 39, pleaded guilty to negligent homicide in December in the death of 25-year-old Sterling Lytle. Under the terms of his plea agreement, Pima County Superior Court Judge Scott Rash could have sentenced Zepeda to as few as four years in prison or as many as eight years.

Rash spent nearly 90 minutes listening to Lytle's loved ones speak about the devastating impact his loss has had on them in a courtroom packed with family members, friends and colleagues.

The judge said he spent hours Sunday reading hundreds of letters written by Lytle's and Zepeda's loved ones.

Lytle, 25, was struck June 28 in a parking lot in the 1600 block of North Alvernon Way.

At the time of the crash, police said Lytle was the passenger in a vehicle headed north on Alvernon when a man in a pickup pulled behind it and started honking the horn and flashing the lights. Lytle got out of the vehicle, and the pickup ran over him before the driver fled.

Lytle was taken to the hospital with life-threatening injuries and was taken off life support on July 3.

Zepeda was arrested July 27.

Zepeda was indicted in August on charges of manslaughter and leaving the scene, but was allowed to enter a plea agreement because of inconsistent statements given by Lytle's companion that night.

According to court documents, three weeks after the crash Lytle's friend told police he wasn't being truthful about the incident.

Court documents indicate Lytle's friend amended his statement to say Zepeda was traveling in the opposite direction when Zepeda flashed his lights at them and sounded his horn.

Lytle's friend admitted he pulled into a parking lot, got out of his vehicle and started going toward Zepeda with his arms in the air, according to court documents.

Lytle's friend went on to concede that he was drunk, driving with his heads lights off and Zepeda was probably scared because both he and Lytle both got out of the vehicle.

"Maybe he got scared and whatever...that's what I think he'd say. Maybe it was self-defense..." the friend told police.

Zepeda told authorities he flashed his lights, honked his horn and pulled into the parking lot to tell Lytle's friend about the headlights. He thought the driver of the other vehicle was holding on to a weapon and he "ducked his head and went forward." He didn't know until later he'd hit Lytle.

Court documents indicate police found skid marks where Lytle's friend pulled into the parking lot.

Lytle had a blood alcohol level of 0.203, but his friend's blood was never tested even though an officer at the scene believed him to be intoxicated and he told police they'd been at three bars that night, Assistant Pima County Public Defender Sean Bruner wrote in court documents.

Bruner also noted the other driver has been given several moving violation tickets since 2008, including three for speeding, one for running a red light and one for driving across a median. He also was driving without insurance the night of the incident, Bruner said.

During Monday's hearing, Deputy Pima County Attorney Jennifer Copenhaver-Celi told Rash that Zepeda had plenty of options that night. He could have driven away when the confrontation began, he could have chosen to stay and give his account of the events and he could have turned himself in, she said.

Copenhaver-Celi also noted Zepeda has a lengthy criminal history. Zepeda was first arrested at 13, had 17 juvenile referrals, 18 misdemeanor convictions and two prior felony convictions. court documents indicate.

Shortly after his death, Lytle's mother, Sarah Lytle Barcelo, and stepfather, Casey Barcelo, spoke with the Star.

Lytle earned his pilot's license at 15, became the youngest docent to give tours at the Pima Air and Space Museum when he was a teenager and was also a member of the championship Air Force Junior ROTC drill team at Catalina High Magnet School.

In 2007 he earned an emergency medical technician (EMT) certificate from Pima Community College and was close to completing his associate's degree in fire science through the school's Public Safety and Emergency Services Institute. Lytle volunteered at Helmut Peak as a firefighter and training captain for four years and prior to his death he had started teaching classes in the EMT program.

More than 200 people visited Lytle at the hospital prior to his death and his organs were donated.

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