

Policeman's death in crash under cloud of suspicion

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Excessive speeding, alcohol may be involved in incident

On Saturday morning, Metro police Officer Paul Cleveland rode his motorcycle in a memorial service for two Wilson County police officers who were killed during a car chase on Interstate 40.

That night, Cleveland met his own fate, drowning when the car he was riding in with two other off-duty Metro officers skidded into the Cumberland River.

"I mean, there's not really a word that can describe him," said Johnnie Melzoni, a Metro police detective who in 1995 befriended Cleveland while they attended Middle Tennessee State University.

" 'Nice' isn't the word. 'Nice' doesn't even come close to describing Paul."

Cleveland gave his all to the job and to policing, Melzoni said.

Authorities said Cleveland was trapped inside the wrecked car when it fell into the river at the end of a dead-end street in Neely's Bend. The driver, William Bishop, and front-seat passenger Cody O'Quinn, also Metro police officers, escaped from the sunken car through the broken sunroof.

Assistant Police Chief Valerie Meece said yesterday that investigators found "physical evidence" inside the car that witnesses say sped down a half-mile stretch of road and then tumbled into the river. She would not say exactly what police found inside the car, a 2004 Pontiac Grand Prix that belonged to Bishop.

In the hours leading up to the crash, the officers had been drinking at a Hooters restaurant on Second Avenue, said David Raybin, a Nashville attorney who has been retained by the Nashville chapter of the Fraternal Order of Police to represent Bishop.

Raybin told *The Tennessean* that Bishop only had two or three beers, was not intoxicated and was the designated driver.

At the time of the crash, Bishop was driving home. He was scheduled to work the "midnight" shift Saturday night, a shift for which many Metro officers report to work around 11 p.m.

The wreck occurred at 9 p.m., with the car skidding off the road at the end of Howse Avenue. Witnesses say the car was speeding, possibly going 80-90 mph down the half-mile stretch.

The Nashville FOP chapter said yesterday that it is paying the attorney's fees for Bishop and O'Quinn. Officers often retain legal counsel for internal investigations and the department's disciplinary process. However, the police union would not pay the fees if there are criminal charges, such as if authorities say alcohol or speeding played a role in the fatal crash, FOP President Calvin Hullett said.

Davidson County District Attorney General Torry Johnson said no decision had been made on whether charges would be filed. It could take weeks for analyses of blood samples to come back from the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation, Johnson said.

The personnel file for Bishop reflects that he has had some disciplinary issues. In February 2002, he was reprimanded after he did not show up to secondary employment scheduled through the department. He also was disciplined twice for his involvement in two wrecks, including one where he was speeding to a call without his emergency lights on.

There will be a dual investigation by police, Meece said. One will cover whether there should be any criminal charges, while the other will look at whether the Police Department's internal policies were violated.

The Metro Police Department's policies on substance use dictate that "no employee shall report for duty after they have ingested any alcohol or prescribed medication which would impair the employee's ability to perform his/her duties."

Melzoni described Cleveland, 28, as a Metro officer who was in touch with his east Nashville beat, which included patrolling some of Nashville's public housing developments, such as the Sam Levy and James Cayce homes.

Cleveland was a 1997 graduate of MTSU, Melzoni said.

Cleveland is survived by his mother, Jody Trammell of Gatlinburg; his father, Jim Leeper of Atlanta; and his sister, Wendy Cleveland Nelson of Knoxville. A service will be 1-2 p.m. tomorrow at the First Church of the Nazarene, 510 Woodland St. His remains will be cremated.