

# Wrong-way driver on I-65 pleads guilty, will serve 2 years in prison

3:27 AM, Nov 17, 2012 |



Fatal crash on I-65 north at Wedgewood: At least one person died in two-vehicle crash February 22, 2012

Rebecca Benson, 22, will serve two years in prison without parole for killing a young woman in a drunken-driving accident in which Benson drove the wrong way on an interstate and collided head-on with the victim's vehicle.

Benson pleaded guilty Friday to vehicular homicide and reckless endangerment. Davidson County Criminal Court Judge Mark Fishburn accepted a plea agreement under which Benson, after her two-year sentence, will be on probation for eight years and be required to perform 80 hours of community service each year she's on probation.

In February, Benson was drinking at the Red Door Saloon in Midtown before she hailed a cab for a ride to her Antioch home, according to Benson's attorney, David Raybin.

Moments before arriving home, Benson instructed the cab driver to take her back to her vehicle near downtown Nashville. Soon after, around 4 a.m., she drove onto southbound Interstate 65 going the wrong way and struck the vehicle of Steffanie Leonard, 29, who died instantly.

After Friday's hearing, members of Leonard's family assembled to talk to reporters about Benson's sentence – a punishment the Leonard family agreed to.

“We do feel like today that, as much as it can be done, justice has been served,” Rebekah Leonard said. “No sentence will be enough to bring back my sister.”

Many observers were surprised to hear that Benson will be serving just two years in prison, a sentence some thought did not match the crime.



“This does not send a good message,” said Renee Armes with the Tennessee chapter of Mothers Against Drunk Driving. “I don’t see that this kind of sentence could deter future behavior.”

Multiple variables in Benson’s case lessened her sentence, Raybin said.

Her age and the fact that she’s a first time offender helped soften her punishment, according to Raybin.

Also aiding her case, said Raybin, were troubling decisions by the Red Door bartender to keep serving her and by the taxi driver who took her back to her vehicle despite how deeply intoxicated she was.

“I don’t want to minimize what she did,” Raybin said. “But there were several unusual factors in this case.”

When a grand jury indicted Benson in July, she faced a maximum prison sentence of 12 years. Her punishment on Friday represented 20 percent of her potential jail sentence.

State statistics show that about 300 people die each year in car crashes in which a driver was legally drunk.

When Benson was arrested, her blood alcohol level was about three times the legal limit. She told the police that she thought she was riding in a taxi when she struck Leonard’s car.

"We have seen a horrible, horrible loss of two women's lives. One on the highway, and one here in court," said defense attorney David Raybin.

Raybin said though the event was tragic, it illustrates a grave lesson.

“This should be something that we all consider,” Raybin said. “Perhaps it may change some behavior on behalf of all of us.”

"I know that no sentence you ever serve will take the place of what happened to Steffanie, but I do know the one thing you can do is make a change in your life and to live your life in a way that would honor her memory," Jennifer Leonard said.

Benson wrote a three-page letter to the Leonard family, expressing her regret about what happened that night.

Marti Leonard said she appreciated it.

