

Police seek motorcyclist charged in woman's death

**By Chris Paschenko**

The Daily News

Published December 24, 2008

GALVESTON — Police suspect a motorcyclist facing a manslaughter charge fled Texas to his home state of Florida shortly after a Dec. 14 wreck that critically injured his passenger, authorities said Tuesday.

Bond for John Michael Venable, 30, of Orlando, was set at \$80,000 on the manslaughter warrant, which police sought after Crystal Lachelle Stephens, 35, of Beaumont, died, Galveston police said.

Venable and Stephens were leaving the Lone Star Rally on the final day of the event when he lost control of his motorcycle, police said.

Stephens, who was Venable's roommate and co-worker, suffered a severe head injury and never regained consciousness. She died the following day, her family said.

Debbie Pulliam, grieving the loss of her only daughter and facing the realization that she was sole guardian of four grandchildren ages 9 to 14, said she received a call from a Memorial Hermann administrator. She didn't recall the administrator's name.

"They said they were contacting me to help set up an account to pay the bill," Pulliam said. "I don't think I'm responsible for her medical bills, and for them to be calling with everything else I'm dealing with, I just told them I can't deal with this right now."

Memorial Hermann didn't respond to questions regarding its collection practices.

Stephens worked for her brother's construction business in Beaumont with Venable, operating a front-end loader, Pulliam said. Stephens left no estate and had no life insurance, Pulliam said.

Pulliam last spoke to her daughter Dec. 12. Stephens finished a weekend job Dec. 13 and decided to attend the Galveston motorcycle rally, Pulliam said.

Venable and Stephens left the rally after it closed at 6 p.m. and the pair traveled south on 25th Street when police said the Harley Davidson contacted trolley tracks that run along the road.

Venable, who was initially charged with driving under the influence, lost control, and Stephens was thrown from the motorcycle, police said. She wasn't wearing a helmet, police said.

With Hurricane Ike's severe flooding having delayed the rally by more than a month and having led to the dismantling of the island's Level 1 trauma center at the University of Texas Medical Branch, PHI Air Medical agreed to station a medical helicopter here.

That helicopter, however, which was scheduled to be stationed at the medical branch helipad between 2 p.m. and 2 a.m., was unavailable. Stephens wasn't taken inside the medical branch. While receiving treatment in an ambulance, she waited at the hospital's helipad for a medical helicopter transport to Houston.

The county health district said it reached an agreement with PHI Air Medical to station a helicopter on the island. There was no contract involved, and the company was not compensated through taxpayer dollars for staging a helicopter here, health district spokesman Kurt Koopmann said.

Duane Sherrill, a PHI spokesman, said the helicopter left before the wreck to fly to its La Porte base for a federally mandated pilot change.

The company didn't rotate a second helicopter to Galveston because the flight to La Porte was only 15 minutes, Sherrill said.

"We are part of a larger emergency response system responsible for serving the needs of the South Texas region, and it was not in the interest of the greater good to involve multiple aircraft for this singular event," Sherrill said.

During the weekend of the wreck, PHI made 15 medical helicopter trips to the island. Not all the calls were related to the rally.

The company's goal is to support the needs and wishes of local authorities, Sherrill said.

"We will continue to work hand-in-hand with officials to support them in providing the best and most appropriate coverage for the island," Sherrill said.

Stephens was buried near Livingston, her hometown, on Friday. Her family has established a memorial fund at First State bank at Livingston, P.O. Box 1277, Livingston, 77351.