



OFFICE OF THE
DISTRICT ATTORNEY
ORANGE COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

TODD SPITZER

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

PRESS RELEASE

Date: October 7, 2022
Case #: 20CF2106

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Repeat Drunk Driver Sentenced to 15 Years to Life in Street Racing Murder that Killed Innocent Driver

Good Samaritans pulled victim out of car as it burst into flames; second driver charged with vehicular manslaughter, hit-and-run for fleeing scene of deadly crash

SANTA ANA, Calif. – A repeat drunk driver was sentenced today to the maximum sentence of 15 years to life for the murder of a longtime Orange County Register editor who he crashed into and killed while street racing in Santa Ana in 2020. The driver he is accused of racing has been charged with vehicular manslaughter and hit and run causing permanent injury or death.

Louie Robert Villa, 31, of Santa Ana, was convicted in August by a jury of one felony count of murder, one felony count of driving under the influence of alcohol causing great bodily injury with a prior DUI conviction, one felony count of driving under the influence of alcohol with a blood alcohol level of greater than .08 with a prior DUI conviction, and one misdemeanor count of driving on a suspended or revoked license with a prior conviction. The jury also found true one enhancement of great bodily injury. Jurors deadlocked 10-2 in favor of guilt on one misdemeanor count of street racing; however Villa pled guilty today to engaging in a street race.

Villa was driving a BMW on Thursday, July 30, 2020 when he and Tolento began racing next to each other at the intersection of 17th Street and Bristol Street in Santa Ana around 11:40 a.m. Villa was seen pulling ahead of Tolento's Infiniti shortly before crashing into a pickup truck making a left turn onto Santa Clara Avenue at Bristol Street.

The crash caused the truck to roll over and burst into flames. Good Samaritans rushed to the victim's aid and pulled him out of the vehicle. The driver, 67-year-old Gene Harbrecht, of Santa Ana, died at the hospital. Harbrecht was on his way back from lunch when he was killed.

Tolento drove away from the scene of the crash without rendering aid to the victim. He was arrested a short time later by the Santa Ana Police Department. Villa's car was disabled in the crash and he was arrested at the scene.

Drivers convicted of driving under the influence in California are required to be given what is known as a Watson advisement that informs them that if they kill someone while driving under the influence they can be charged with murder. Villa acknowledged that he received that advisement after pleading guilty to driving under the influence in 2012.

Prior to sentenced Villa apologized to Harbrecht's widow, Patricia, in open court, expressing remorse for his actions and promising to change his ways. Following the court hearing, Patricia Harbrecht hugged a handcuffed Villa and kissed him on the cheek.

"The death of an innocent man was a result of years of poor choices by the defendant to drink and drive even after he had been warned of the deadly consequences," said Orange County District Attorney Todd Spitzer. "Watson murders are some of the most tragic cases we prosecute because all too often the victims are completely innocent people and the defendants didn't wake up that day intending to commit a murder, but regardless of what they intended an innocent person was left dead as a result of their choices. Nothing will bring Gene Harbrecht back to his wife and loved ones; but hopefully his death will be enough to redirect the trajectory of his murderer's life after he completes his prison sentence – and it will serve as a warning to anyone else who wants to get behind the wheel drunk or high and race on Orange County's streets. The Orange County District Attorney's Office will vigorously prosecute illegal street racing and driving under the influence cases to the fullest extent of the law."

The other driver, Ricardo Tolento, 26, of Santa Ana, has been charged with one felony count of vehicular manslaughter with gross negligence while engaging in a street race, one felony hit and run causing permanent injury or death and one misdemeanor count of street racing. He has also been charged with an enhancement of hit and run. Tolento faces a maximum of 11 years in state prison if convicted of all charges. Tolento is scheduled to go to trial later this year.

In response to a dramatic increase in illegal street racing and street takeovers during the pandemic, Orange County District Attorney Todd Spitzer partnered with members of the Fast & Furious movie franchise to produce an anti-street racing public service announcement to encourage street racers to keep it on the track and off our streets.

[Download the Orange County District Attorney's Office Anti-street Racing PSA here.](#)

Deputy District Attorney Brian Orue of the Homicide Unit is prosecuting this case.

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