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Parents of Broward student who died after school SUV crash may sue school

By Macollvie Jean-François and Sallie James | South Florida Sun Sentinel 12:45 PM EDT, May 7, 2009

COCONUT CREEK - The parents of a 17-year-old private school student killed in a rollover crash that killed a teacher and injured six classmates say they may sue the Oakland Park school, according to their attorney Jamie Finizio Bascombe.

Codie Elizabeth Lewis died earlier this week. She was among eight injured Sunday morning when a school-owned Chevrolet Suburban rolled over on the Coconut Creek Parkway exit ramp on Florida's Turnpike, according to the Florida Highway Patrol.

The family of another student, Chantell Ellis, also have hired counsel.

"We are evaluating everything," Finizio Bascombe said today. "The parents gave permission for their children to go and it was to be a chartered bus or school bus. Not knowing is really one of the biggest concerns. They didn't know about it."



Chantell Ellis, 17, a student at South Florida Christian Preparatory Academy, was injured on a school trip in an SUV crash that has left one of her classmates and a teacher dead. (Family handout photo / May 4, 2009)

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A viewing for Lewis will be from 5 to 9 p.m. Friday at McWhite's Funeral Home, at 3501 W. Broward Blvd. A funeral service will be at 10 a.m. on Saturday at New Hope Baptist Church, 1321 NW Sixth St., Fort Lauderdale.

Meanwhile, the mother of injured student Chantell Ellis, 17, said her daughter will undergo surgery today for a broken jaw.

Eugenia Ellis said she had talked only a little with her daughter because the teen has been sedated.

Pompano Beach attorney Joe Maus, who is representing Ellis' family, said the teen suffered a collapsed lung, broken jaw and several broken ribs in the crash.

"We are investigating all possible causes, including securing the Suburban to examine exactly how the crash occurred," Maus said today.

The students attend South Florida Preparatory Christian Academy. They were returning from a class trip to Universal Studios in Orlando.

No one in the car wore a seat belt, FHP officials said.

It appears the driver, Livingston James Finley, 18, fell asleep and lost control of the SUV, investigators said.

No one answered the door at his home late Wednesday afternoon. Finley's brief driving record lists only

minor infractions with no points off his license.

Efforts to contact Lewis' family were also unsuccessful.

Gerald Jerome Oliphant, 27, the teacher accompanying the group of seven students, died Sunday.

Chantell Ellis and Demetri Johnson, 20, remained hospitalized, Chantell's mother said today.

Nolan Browne and Tekhoya Browne, both 17, Jackson Walker, 19, and Finley were treated and released, she said.

School owner Julius Brown said staff decided to let Finley drive that night because most of the school employees were very tired.

Brown said he was not consulted on the decision and would have told them to stop and rest had it been brought to him.

Jamie Finizio Bascomb, attorney for the Lewis family, said Codie's parents signed off on the trip expecting adult chaperones to drive.

The school is at 2700 W. Oakland Park Blvd., on the second floor of a two-story shopping center.

Brown said the site houses most of the classrooms and administrative offices, although some classrooms are at another site, he said.

*Staff Writer Rafael Olmeda and Staff Researcher Barbara Hijek contributed to this report.*

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