

PARAMUS

Driver in fatal Paramus school bus crash sentenced to up to 10 years in prison

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The mother of a 10-year-old victim said she felt like she died along with her daughter. Students talked of pain and trauma that remain fresh, almost two years later.

In an emotional, five-hour court hearing in Morristown on Wednesday, survivors of the deadly Paramus school bus crash on Route 80 tearfully demanded justice for the 2018 accident that left a fifth-grader and a middle school teacher dead and dozens injured.

In the end, a judge sentenced bus driver Hudy Muldrow to up to 10 years in prison, citing his decision to attempt an illegal U-turn across the highway that ended in a shattering collision with a dump truck.

“It’s a severe sentence imposed for severe circumstances and severe conduct,” Judge Stephen Taylor told a courtroom packed with almost 100 onlookers. “I’m sentencing Mr. Muldrow for an extreme act of recklessness that caused significant, significant harm to so many individuals.”

Muldrow, 79, will serve a minimum of five years and nine months when accounting for parole eligibility. His driver's license will also be suspended for two years after he leaves prison.

The sentence followed hours of statements from friends and family members of the victims, who filled a historic courtroom in the Morris County Courthouse that is normally reserved for ceremonial events.

“My heart’s destroyed because of one careless act of a man,” said Lorena Vargas, whose 10-year-old daughter Miranda died in the crash. “Every single night I relive that horrible day. That day I died as well.”

Story continues below the gallery

Muldrow slumped in his seat for much of the proceeding, looking down and occasionally wiping away tears. When it was his turn to speak, the Paterson man stood to offer an apology.

“I’ve suffered. I have a family, I have kids, grandkids, and throughout my life I’ve been helping kids,” he said. “I did everything that I could to help people. I’m sorry. I have a lot of remorse, and I loved those kids that I was driving.”

Muldrow was led away in handcuffs after his family members formed a semicircle around him and prayed.

He pleaded guilty in December to “driving the bus sideways” across three lanes of the highway after missing an exit in Mount Olive for the historic Waterloo Village, where the group was heading on a field trip in May 2018.

The accident killed Vargas and teacher Jennifer Williamson, 51, and left some 40 other passengers from East Brook Middle School injured. Muldrow admitted to trying to turn around in a grassy median reserved for official use before the bus crashed into a dump truck and flipped over. The impact tore the bus cab from its chassis and also injured the truck driver.

Williamson’s brother Doug spoke of his sister’s love for teaching and the fifth-graders she mentored.

“The reason she was such a good teacher was because she loved what she did. She connected with people,” he said. “I know Jen would want me to move on and forgive, but I just can’t.”

Several students who were on the bus also addressed the court, many crying as they spoke. They called the accident a defining moment in their young lives. Sophia Russo said she's still haunted by the smell of burned rubber and smoke and the sight of emergency responders attempting to revive Vargas.

“I had to learn how to be happy again,” she said. “Nobody understands how tragic this accident is for us. The accident changed me forever, and I’ll never be the same Sophia ever again.”

But Muldrow's family pleaded for mercy.

“It’s unfair to take a part out of somebody’s life and judge them,” his son, Ronnie Murphy, told the judge. “My father has never done anything on purpose to hurt nobody, ever.”

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Muldrow's grandnephew, Kevin Hawkins, described his great-uncle as a God-fearing man who left a segregated South Carolina for a new life up north, where he found work as a sewing machine operator, foreman, custodial worker, cook, singer and, finally, driver. He has 12 children and more than 20 grandchildren, Hawkins said.

Lawsuits looming

The majority of the fifth-graders, teachers and parents aboard the bus have filed motions of their intent to sue, seeking damages for deaths or injuries that resulted in long hospital stays. Most of the complaints would hold the Paramus school district liable for hiring Muldrow and allegedly failing to provide proper oversight.

Muldrow was cited for reckless driving less than two months before the crash. His license had been suspended 14 times since 1975, most recently in December 2017, according to state driving records. While the most recent suspension and five others were for unpaid parking tickets, Muldrow also received eight speeding tickets, one ticket for careless driving and a summons for unsafe operation of a motor vehicle.

The state Department of Education notified Paramus Schools Superintendent Michele Robinson in December 2017 that the state Motor Vehicle Commission had revoked Muldrow's bus driver endorsement, contradicting Robinson's statement after the crash that she was not aware of anything disqualifying in his record. The endorsement was restored in January 2018, allowing Muldrow again to operate school buses.

The school district has denied liability in court filings.

Muldrow was indicted on dozens of counts and set to stand trial in January before accepting a plea deal in December. His attorney, Matthew Reisig, unsuccessfully attempted to move the trial out of Bergen, Morris and Sussex counties last year, arguing that a barrage of "carnival-like" publicity and public vitriol would deny the bus driver an impartial jury.

Muldrow ultimately pleaded guilty to two counts of second-degree reckless vehicular homicide, five counts of fourth-degree vehicular assault by auto, one count of third-degree endangering the welfare of a child and a disorderly persons assault by auto summons.

Reisig had characterized Muldrow's offense as a failure to maintain a traffic lane.

Taylor, the judge, called that a "gross understatement" on Wednesday and questioned why Muldrow still has not explained why he attempted such a dangerous traffic maneuver.

"I'm not sure that deep down he fully appreciates his actions that day," Taylor said. "I am concerned that he may view this collision as a mere accident or as simple negligence, and it's not. It goes well beyond that."

The crash left Paramus reeling and then rallying under the motto "Paramus Strong." It also spurred a wave of legislation to boost school bus safety. Three months after the crash, Gov. Phil Murphy signed a law requiring new school buses to be equipped with shoulder restraints and three-point seat belts to reduce the risk of injuries in a side-impact collision.

Other laws increased medical exams for older drivers, mandated biannual safety classes for drivers and school bus aides, required the state Department of Education to notify local authorities when a driver's license is revoked or suspended and mandated a 90-day suspension of a school bus driver's endorsement if the driver accumulates three or more moving violations in a three-year period or six or more penalty points.

In May 2019, U.S. Rep. Josh Gottheimer reintroduced the Miranda Vargas School Bus Driver Red Flag Act — "Miranda's Law" — in the House of Representatives to establish a system that would automatically notify school districts and school bus operators of driver violations. The bill is still under consideration.

Svetlana Shkolnikova covers local news and Superior Court in Morris County for NorthJersey.com. For unlimited access to the most important news from criminal trials to local lawsuits and insightful analysis, please subscribe or activate your digital account today.

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