

## No charges for state trooper who shot Hammond man - Advocate, The (Baton Rouge, LA) - March 11, 2019

March 11, 2019 | Advocate, The (Baton Rouge, LA) | Lea Skene

A Louisiana State Police trooper will not face criminal charges after the September incident in downtown Hammond that started as a traffic stop and ended when the trooper fired six shots into the fleeing vehicle, killing its driver.

The 21st Judicial District Attorney's Office released documents Monday that detail the State Police investigation and explain why District Attorney Scott Perrilloux recently decided the shooting was justified. Those reasons include concern for bystanders who could have been placed in danger if the driver — who appeared intoxicated during the traffic stop — had successfully fled the scene.

But the driver's family is challenging the fairness of that decision, arguing investigators and prosecutors are covering up criminal wrongdoing to protect their own.

The trooper was identified in State Police records as Andre Bezou, who joined the agency as a new recruit in August 2017 and became a state trooper less than a year before the fatal traffic stop. The incident was captured in body camera video, which reveals new details about what happened.

The Advocate is not publishing the video due to its graphic content.

The footage shows that **Coltin LeBlanc**, 23, initially complied with Bezou's instructions during the Sept. 27, 2018, traffic stop. He pulled over on North Oak Street and stepped out of his pickup truck as instructed. But when he reentered the vehicle to get his driver's license, LeBlanc suddenly pressed his foot to the accelerator and turned onto U.S. 190.

Bezou reacted almost instantaneously and grabbed onto the driver's door frame as the truck accelerated, yelling instructions at LeBlanc. The trooper discharged his weapon seconds later.

State Police interviewed several witnesses, who prosecutors said were all "consistent with the fact that had Trooper Bezou not discharged his weapon, he would have been dragged or tossed from the vehicle."

"Trooper Bezou noted that he immediately suspected intoxication when he encountered LeBlanc and was fearful that allowing LeBlanc to speed away recklessly would endanger the innocent bystanders that were present in downtown Hammond," according to a report from prosecutors explaining their decision not to seek charges.

LeBlanc's mother adamantly disputes that assessment. She has not viewed video footage of the incident but has from the beginning challenged whether her son's death was a necessary outcome.

"That cop put his own life in danger — he grabbed onto a moving vehicle," Sherry LeBlanc said in

an interview Monday. "That doesn't give him the right to kill my son. Why did he have to shoot so many times?"

Sherry LeBlanc also acknowledged that her son had struggled with alcoholism and shouldn't have been driving. He had been drinking earlier that night and his license was still suspended after four DWI arrests in 2016 between the beginning of June and beginning of July.

Those prior arrests resulted from **Coltin LeBlanc** being passed out from drinking in the driver's seat of a parked vehicle, often with open containers of beer in the cup holder, according to arrest reports.

Toxicology tests from the night of his death showed his blood alcohol content was 0.206, which is over twice the state's 0.08 legal presumption of drunk driving. Prosecutors took that into consideration when determining whether the shooting was justified.

"I thought the DA's office would do the right thing. That's what I hoped," Sherry LeBlanc said. "I've always been one to support law enforcement, but I do not trust the system anymore because I feel like they're covering it up and protecting their own."

Hobart Pardue, an attorney representing the family, said he has notified State Police that the family is planning to pursue a wrongful death claim against the agency, seeking damages on behalf of **Coltin LeBlanc's** son, now 3 years old.

State Police spokesman Lt. Nick Manale said the agency has launched an internal investigation to determine whether Bezou will face discipline for possible policy violations. Manale said that investigation is ongoing and the trooper has returned to regular duty in the meantime.

He said it's routine procedure for State Police to investigate shootings involving their own officers, though the agency is often called to conduct those investigations for other agencies across the state as well. Manale also said it's part of State Police duties to patrol highways throughout Louisiana, not just interstates, so it's not unusual for a trooper to pull someone over on a city street.

Bezou said in a taped interview with investigators four days after the shooting that LeBlanc appeared intoxicated — his eyes "bloodshot and glassy" and his balance "very unsteady" — when he stepped out of his truck. The trooper said LeBlanc's body language could have been a sign that he was going to "start some trouble." But Bezou said he came to that conclusion only in retrospect. He added: "If I had more years in law enforcement, I might have been able to recognize that as such."

The trooper initiated the stop because LeBlanc had turned without using his blinker and failed to come to a complete stop at a stop sign.

Bezou went on to detail the moments leading up to the shooting. Asked multiple times to describe his reasoning when he grabbed onto LeBlanc's truck, Bezou said his intention was "to stop the vehicle, to stop the driver, to stop him from killing somebody on the roadway — to prevent death or serious bodily harm to the people around." He also said he would have been in the path of the

vehicle's rear tire if he hadn't jumped on.

The trooper then found himself "holding on for dear life" with his "rear end about a foot off the ground."

"I'm hollering at him (to) stop the car ... and he ain't doing it," Bezou said. "I was in fear for my life, so I pulled my firearm out and aimed it at him."

The trooper said LeBlanc continued to accelerate and then tried to reach for the weapon, grabbing Bezou's wrist — a detail that is not visible on the video footage. "It was at that point that I opened fire on the suspect," Bezou said. "I fired I think six times and finally he stopped the vehicle."

What the footage does show is that the incident unfolded in rapid succession. About 10 seconds passed between when LeBlanc placed his foot on the accelerator and when he was shot.

LeBlanc rolled out the door and into the road, at which point a bystander started rendering aid and identified himself as a former U.S. Army medic. He continued talking to LeBlanc and holding pressure to his wounds until medical crews arrived on the scene.

LeBlanc later died in the hospital. Bezou was not injured.

The district attorney said the incident was "certainly a very tragic situation."

"But in the end, our analysis is whether or not we think the officer committed a crime, and clearly we don't, based on the evidence and the investigation," Perrilloux said. "Like most of these police shootings, they're split second decisions. Evaluating them in hindsight is always difficult, but I think this case was clear."