

Woman Pleads Guilty In Drunk Driving Death In Alton

by Sanford Schmidt

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ALTON - A woman with a long history of drunk driving was sentenced Wednesday to eight years in prison for crashing head-on with a motorcycle, knocking Natasha J. Dillinger, 27, of Bethalto off the bike, killing her.

Erin L. Arras, 45, of Belleville, agreed to plead guilty to driving under the influence of alcohol resulting in injury or death, in exchange for an eight-year prison sentence. She will have to serve at least 85 percent of her sentence.

The normal sentencing range is three to 14 years. "A few years in prison in exchange for a life doesn't make sense to me," said Zachary Cable, her cousin, in his victim impact statement.

Assistant State's Attorney Andrew Thierry said the defendant's blood-alcohol level was measured at 0.21 percent, compared with a level of 0.08 for a legal presumption of intoxication.

He said Arras was westbound on Broadway on Sept. 7, 2020, when she turned into a parking lot in the 700 block of Broadway, then headed back east where she crashed head-on into the motorcycle.

Family members said Wednesday that the victim went flying through the air and landed on her head. She died of a severe head injury two days later in a St. Louis hospital. "I keep seeing my daughter flying through the air," said Debbie Dillinger, her mother.

"She cruelly and senselessly took a life because of a choice she made a choice, as she has in the past, as evidenced by a lengthy record of alcohol abuse," said Amy Dillinger, the victim's aunt. "Our family has been gutted."

She was twice placed on court supervision in St. Clair County for driving under the influence in 2010 and 2011. She has been charged in St. Clair County four times with driving on a suspended license, but all of those charges were dismissed. She was placed on supervision in 1995 for misdemeanor possession of liquor by a minor.

"There are no words to express how sorry I am," Arras said. She said she will do what is necessary to right her wrong-doing. "It was selfish and reckless," she said. The judge's sentence also includes a recommendation for alcohol treatment.

Arras was temporarily allowed to remain free on bond until the Illinois Department of Corrections has room for her. She must turn herself in when notified.

Arras is also a defendant in a lawsuit in which she, Fast Eddie's Bon Air, and William Smith, the motorcycle driver, were named. The tavern is accused of serving Arras the liquor. Smith is accused of speeding. The case is pending.