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W. Lebanon Driver Dies After Crash



Ingrid Neuwirt (Courtesy photograph)

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Lebanon — A West Lebanon woman injured last week in the latest Route 4 car collision has died, after her family spent days in the hospital grappling over what course of action to take because her religion forbade doctors from providing standard care.

Ingrid Neuwirt, 72, died late Sunday night at Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center after she was removed from life support. Neuwirt became the fifth person to die as a result of a Route 4 car accident in the Hartford/Woodstock area since March, a spate of tragedies that has prompted Gov. Peter Shumlin and other officials to announce support for safety upgrades on the highway.

Neuwirt was a devout Jehovah's Witness, a religion that calls on members to avoid receiving blood transfusions. Her son, George Neuwirt, of Sunapee, said he left the church nearly two decades ago because he objected to the doctrine and, thanks to their philosophical divide, had not seen his sister Vera Neuwirt, an active member of the church, in a decade until they came together in the hospital in the final days of their mother's life.

Despite their differences, George said the siblings made a "good team," while at DHMC discussing their mother's case. They have a brother, Alex Neuwirt, of Newbury, N.H.

"All of us agreed that it's her feelings that were to be respected, and it's our job to see they are implemented," said Vera Neuwirt, who had power of attorney over her mother and carried out wishes formalized in an advanced directive.

"I quietly disagreed, but the reality is I don't know if I'm right," George Neuwirt said. "We all go through life with this perception that we are right about all things, but it's based on our perspective. We don't know if we're right or not."

George said his son's birth led him to reconsider his relationship with the church.

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"It was unfathomable to me that I could not save his life with a blood transfusion," George Neuwirt said. "To me, it's a credit to God to be able to have this capacity."

When Neuwirt was initially taken to the emergency room on Thursday, doctors were unaware of her directives and gave her several units of blood and platelets during emergency procedures, family members said.

Once family members arrived and had time to consult with the medical team, the course of treatment changed, they said. However, her injuries were traumatic, including numerous broken bones, and both police and the family said it is likely that no amount of medical care would have saved Neuwirt.

"The likelihood of her surviving was extremely slim," Vera Neuwirt, of Hopkinton, N.H., said.

The siblings said DHMC "mediators" helped them sort through their philosophical differences and understand issues surrounding their mother's care.

DHMC spokesman Rick Adams said the hospital does not have mediators per se, it frequently utilizes doctors, nurses, social workers and sometimes chaplains to help family members decide on treatment plans. They are most often called upon when a patient does not have a directive — only 20 percent of DHMC patients have end-of-life orders on file at the hospital, Adams said.

"The goal is to come to the conclusion in the best interest of the patient," said Adams who, citing privacy laws, said he was speaking generally and not about the Neuwirts.

Neuwirt was taken off life support at 9 p.m. Sunday and died at 11 p.m.

She was born in Germany and had immigrated to the United States as a teenager and then lived for several years in New York City, before eventually moving to New Hampshire in 1972. Neuwirt and her husband Michael divorced when their children were young.

While raising her family in Lebanon, Neuwirt worked hard, taking jobs at a local bank and a clothing manufacturer, among other employers, her son said. At the time of the accident, she was driving to Quechee, where she cleaned for a homeowner.

"She had simple jobs that paid the bills," George Neuwirt said. "She struggled and struggled. We learned to work at an early age and appreciate money."

She was a vital woman, who dressed and acted younger than her age: She had close friends decades younger than her, and enjoyed taking bus trips with them to New York City, where she could act as a tour guide.

"She loved life," Vera Neuwirt said. "She was always a young thinker."

Neuwirt had long been a Jehovah's Witness, and her faith had only intensified in later years: When they were cleaning out her apartment, her children found stacks of cards with religious messages.

While the investigation is ongoing, Hartford Deputy Police Chief Brad Vail said evidence suggests that Neuwirt drifted into the opposite lane while driving east in Quechee and slammed her 1997 Toyota Camry into a 2009 Subaru Outback driven by 43-year-old Shirley Adams, of White River Junction. Adams survived.

The Neuwirt family, which has been informed of the preliminary findings, is perplexed that their mother erred while driving.

"Why she would have crossed the center-line? We are beside ourselves," George Neuwirt said. "You expect it from a 16-year-old, but not my mother. She was eyes glued to the road. She always wore a seat belt — she didn't this time. It's bizarre."

The Neuwirt family has followed the stories about Route 4, where a series of head-on collisions since March prompted Shumlin, along with Senate President Pro Tempore John Campbell, D-Quechee, and other state officials to announce last week that they will repave the road and install rumble stripes by the end of July to try to prevent collisions. Long-term, the state is planning to completely rebuild sections of the road, and possibly straighten curves and make the road less susceptible to degradation.

Moreover, in recent days, both the state and the Hartford police have deployed electronic signs along the road, urging motorists to drive cautiously.

George Neuwirt, who owns a construction company and often drives a semi-trailer truck on Route 4, said he hoped his mother's death would raise awareness of what he called an "inherently deadly" road.

"That road is horrible," George Neuwirt said. "When I go up there I cringe. The whole contour of that road, it's like the embankments are collapsing and the road is going with it. And it's windy and turny. I can't imagine somebody biking or walking on that road with my truck going by."

His sister said any improvements to the road would be welcome, but too late.

"If they do it to prevent fatal accidents, that would be lovely," Vera Neuwirt said. "But what is done is done."

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