

Parents of crash victim speak on GM recall

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The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke to Gordon and Brenda Hair, the parents of Benjamin Hair, who died in a one-car crash in Charlottesville, Virginia while driving his 2007 Pontiac G5 in December 2009. The G5 was one of the models involved in the recent recall by GM of cars with a deadly ignition defect which can cause the engine to shut off unexpectedly, disabling power steering, power brakes and airbags, leaving occupants unprotected in the event of a crash.

The accident took place in the middle of the day and did not involve alcohol, cell phone use, ice on the road or excessive speed. However, the car suddenly left the highway and slammed into a tree. Benjamin was wearing a seatbelt, but the airbags did not deploy. The Hairs tried to get information from GM about a possible safety defect, but got no answers. The difficulty in determining a cause was compounded by the fact that the black box that monitored the vehicle’s functions had been destroyed.

Benjamin’s death occurred just two weeks before his 21st birthday. He was awarded posthumously a degree of Bachelor of Science by Virginia Tech University where he was a pharmacy student. As a memorial to their son, a lifelong swimmer, the family established the Benjamin Hair Just Swim for Life Foundation to help promote water safety.

GM is now asking a New York bankruptcy judge for protection from legal claims arising from before it went bankrupt. As part of the bankruptcy reorganization the Obama administration inserted a clause holding GM harmless for incidents occurring before July 2009.

Gordon Hair, Benjamin’s father, said he had watched the recent Congressional hearings featuring testimony by GM CEO Mary Barra. “I saw bits of Barra’s

testimony and felt surprised and shocked. Having had a career with a top 20 corporation I was surprised that they hadn’t already cleared house before the hearing. Her apology was less than meaningful and less than heartfelt.

“They are only admitting 13 dead. Our son is not included in that count and they have never called us.”

Gordon said he found Barra’s claim that she didn’t know about the ignition defect incredible. “There wasn’t anyone in senior management who didn’t know about this. They went into bankruptcy negotiations stipulating that there would be no liability before July 2009. I am quite certain they were trying to get away from their legal responsibilities. Their legal department knew full well there were problems with the ignition. My position is you have a notice that the power steering can fail, then who’s to say it didn’t fail?

“I am not sure how you hold a company responsible. I am quite certain they know who can be held accountable. It all eventually lands on the CEO, the CFO and the COO. So to protect that management everyone else is up for grabs.

“My wife attempted to pursue this beginning in March 2010 when we first saw news that GM was issuing recalls related to power steering and loss of control. The investigators couldn’t figure out how the accident involving our son had occurred. So my wife went after GM.

“When she finally talked to the insurance investigator, she was told that all the information was considered by the GM engineering department and that GM was not responsible. The legal department also said she could not prove they were responsible. She spent hours with a local attorney, and he concurred we

didn't have enough money or energy to prove GM accountable.

"After the accident we spent four years trying to get GM to stop sending us recall notices about the power steering. My wife became depressed and it culminated with her having a stroke.

"Then the *New York Times* called us in March about the ignition switch defect. We were told that the airbags not deploying was due to the ignition problem. However, we didn't receive a recall notice until a week after the interview with the *New York Times*. That's when we started realizing there was more to this. GM knew many years in advance of the accident that they had this faulty vehicle. Now I feel that GM is responsible since they put my son in a faulty vehicle with two strikes against it. We know now just how negligent and criminal they were to allow something this deadly to continue."

Brenda Hair added, "The police could not give us a definite reason for the accident. I thought at first about hydroplaning.

"My son reclined when he was driving so his knee could have brushed the key chain. In so doing the power brakes and power steering would cut off and the airbags would not deploy."

Gordon remarked, "There was no skidding. The brakes were not applied. CNN and Fox News actually drove the road to get an idea what happened. I have not been able to visualize in four years how he could lose control and wind up where he did."

Brenda continued, "In my communications with GM I sent them everything I had. They said they determined the power steering was not at fault. I asked for the engineers' report. They said it was privileged. They didn't send me anything to show how they determined the car was not at fault.

"We were always thinking it was the power steering. We didn't know anything about the ignition switch. We are still getting recall notices for the power steering and we don't have the car. Now I guess I will get another recall notice about the ignition."



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