

# Family of 14-year-old boy who died at Orlando, Florida amusement park plans to file lawsuit as evidence of recklessness, endangerment surface

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8 April 2022

The horrific death of 14-year-old Tyre Sampson on March 24 in Orlando, Florida, continues to evoke widespread shock and anger two weeks after the teen fell to his death while riding the Orlando FreeFall amusement ride in ICON Park. As state and police investigations into the tragedy remain ongoing, evidence continues to mount exposing possible irregularities and recklessness in the ride's operation and manufacturing.

Sampson's death made national headlines after cellphone footage capturing his fall from the drop tower ride went viral, triggering an outpouring of grief and support.

Hundreds of people nationwide have participated in vigils and visited an Orlando memorial honoring the loss of Sampson. One of the supporters for the teen told ClickOrlando: "No one should have to go through what the family is going through right now."

Within a few days after the teen's death, a march was staged involving Sampson's family, friends and scores of other supporters demanding that the ride be taken down and there be "Justice for Tyre."

A Facebook message post from Tyre's mother, Nekia Dodd, read: "3/24/2022 is the day my life changed forever! No parent wants to receive news of their child's passing over the phone AND in another state to make matters even worse." Most of Dodd's posts about the fatal incident at the park were met with hundreds of reactions and replies expressing their support and sadness over the child's sudden death.

Attorneys representing Tyre's parents visited ICON Park Tuesday morning and said the family plans on filing a negligence and product liability lawsuit in the coming weeks against the companies tied to the boy's death. Attorney Ben Crump, who represents Tyre's father Yarnell Sampson, told reporters the case was being handled as a "thorough investigation into the tragic killing of this 14-year-old child who should have never been killed."

Crump likened the death of the teen to the police murder of George Floyd in the summer of 2020, an event that triggered a

wave of protests and demonstrations against police violence involving millions across the world. "Other than George Floyd's tragic torture video, I think this is the worst tragedy captured on video that I've ever seen," Crump said.

Although officials at ICON Park announced both the Orlando FreeFall ride and Orlando Slingshot, both operated by the company Slingshot Group, would be closed indefinitely, many have called for the ride to be shut down, citing flagrant dangers for passenger safety.

Amusement ride experts have pointed to the safety hazards pertaining to the structure of the ride and absence of critical safety requirements contained in Florida legislation that cover amusement attractions.

SlingShot Group and its attendants were permitted to not display a maximum weight requirement for patrons due to a "loophole" in Florida law. Sampson was allowed to ride on the drop tower despite the operator manual for FreeFall stating that the maximum passenger weight is just over 286 pounds. Sampson's family and coaches have stressed the teen's size, 6'5" and about 360 pounds, was far too heavy to have been allowed on the ride.

Florida statute 616.242 lists various safety standards for amusement rides, with one stating that operators must present "signs that advise or warn patrons of age restrictions, size restrictions, health restrictions, weight limitations, or any other special consideration or use restrictions" that may be harmful to ride-goers. The law adds the caveat, however, that such protocols should be enforced only if "required or recommended for the amusement ride by the manufacturer," and, thereafter, "must be prominently displayed at the patron entrance of each amusement ride."

The manufacturer's operating manual for FreeFall only required the posting or open display of a height restriction, along with other limitations with ambiguous language such as "large people," but no exact maximum weight was placed for patrons to see. Brian Avery, a lecturer at the University of

Florida and ride safety expert, told Fox News Digital that the law is a “loophole of sorts.” Avery said, “you have to post that information so that they [passengers or operators] can make an informed decision as to whether this rider device fits them.”

Further evidence that the operation of the ride did not include the necessary requirement came from photos on social media that seemed to show a “rider qualification” sign at the entrance of the Orlando FreeFall ride. The sign listed a height requirement for individuals, but no mention of a weight limit. Nor was there a scale to measure the weight of passengers. SlingShot Group has also refused to disclose whether the ride displayed a weight limit prior to the teen’s death.

Another critical safety measure that was entirely excluded from the amusement ride were seat belts for passengers. The seats of the FreeFall tower only contained a harness to protect patrons from falling out. Video and photo footage of the incident, however, clearly showed Sampson’s harness being far higher than the other riders. Democrat Nikki Fried, the Florida Commissioner of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FCACS), released a report on March 28 that said when the ride’s magnets engaged upon descent, Sampson “came out” but, “Sampson’s harness was still in a down and locked position when the ride stopped.”

The implementation of additional protection to hold passengers, according to Avery, would have been crucial in preventing Sampson from slipping out of his seat. The lecturer told ClickOrlando that Sampson’s life would have been spared had FreeFall’s design included a belt. “I absolutely do believe that a seatbelt would have saved his life. There is no recommendation or requirement, if you will, for safety devices,” he said.

The manufacturer for FreeFall is FunTime Thrill Rides, an Austrian-based ride designer that constructed two other rides operated by the SlingShot Group, with one of them, Orlando StarFlyer, also closed pending the investigation by authorities. In a letter made public by the FDACS, the manufacturer claimed that there was “no need for an extra safety or seat belt.”

According to Bill Kitchen, President of U.S. Thrill Rides, it would have cost no more than \$20 to add belt straps to the seats. “It costs about \$20, and the straps will hold about six thousand pounds,” Kitchen told WESH news. “Operator errors can occur and machine errors can occur but this is overwhelmingly the way to prevent anyone from ever coming out of that seat. And the opinion of everyone I talked to in the business is that the seat belts should be on that ride,” Kitchen said.

The decision of FunTime Thrill Rides and Slingshot Group to design and put into operation such a large-scale amusement attraction without seatbelts or adequate weight restrictions is a testament to the profit-driven nature of the amusement industry, whose companies will forego putting in place restraints in order to cut costs, and then allow consumers to enter their rides

despite the obvious risks posed to their health and safety. Amusement rides rake in billions in profits annually, with companies often competing to construct the most extreme attractions and then placing them into parks as quickly as possible regardless of optimal safety measures being met.

Amusement parks and attractions have not been federally regulated since 1981, as states have been left solely responsible for oversight of ride safety. Many states, however, do not even carry laws that require safety regulations and those that do, such as Florida, leave the matter to underfunded regulatory departments such as the FDACS. Moreover, Florida’s laws also hold exemptions for the most popular amusement parks like Universal Studios and Walt Disney World, which are not bound by any inspections or state investigations, even in the case of accidents.

At a news conference in Orlando, Fried and fellow Democratic Party State Representative Geraldine Thompson said “legislative action” was needed to expand the FDACS’ authority over amusement parks and rides. “I’m also here today to reassure Tyre’s family, friends, and all those impacted by this tragedy that we are fully committed to finding out what happened so we can better prevent such tragedies from happening in the future,” Fried said.

Thompson, speaking as a representative of the district which includes Orlando, declared: “Once we have the [final report of the] investigation, I’ll be working on the Tyree Sampson Bill to address whatever the problems are. And the theme parks, all of them, are in my legislative district, so I know that tourism in this area is the lifeblood of the state of Florida and of the community. So I have a lot of stakeholders who are very interested in coming together and working collaboratively to address the problem.”

No faith can be placed on the Democratic Party taking action to reverse the state’s deregulated and pro-corporate policies. It should be noted that it was Fried and the FDACS that greenlighted the operation of FreeFall at an initial permit inspection last December. The department released a report following the death of Sampson justifying their action, claiming that there were “no deficiencies” found in the ride.

The promises of Fried and Thompson mean even less coming from a Democratic Party that accepts millions of dollars in donations from major amusement park giants, with Fried herself having been the recipient of generous amounts to her Political Action Committee. One can expect an outcome of the investigation that significantly whitewashes the recklessness of the company and the complicity of state officials for not ensuring adequate safety measures were put in place.



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