

Fatal Hellertown fire that claimed sisters was caused by charging hoverboard, lawsuit alleges

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By Sarah Cassi | For lehighvalleylive.com

A Hellertown house fire that killed two sisters was caused by a charging hoverboard, a new lawsuit alleges.

Brianna “Bri Bri” N. Baer, 15, and Abigail “Abbie” Kaufman, 10, were killed in the April blaze in the home in the 600 block of Linden Avenue in the Northampton County borough.

The girls’ parents, Jennifer Lee and Damien Kaufman, filed a federal lawsuit on Wednesday against the hoverboard manufacturer, Jetson Electric Bikes, and Walmart, where the hoverboard was sold, according to the family’s legal counsel.

A hoverboard is a platform with two motorized wheels that moves based on the rider shifting his or her weight forward or backward.

Walmart in a statement Wednesday said: “Our thoughts go out to the Kaufman family for their loss. We expect our suppliers to provide safe, quality products that meet all applicable laws and regulations. We will respond with the Court as appropriate after we are served with the complaint.”

A message left for comment on the suit with Jetson Electric Bikes LLC, based in Brooklyn, was not immediately returned.

The Jetson Rogue Hoverboard has a “defective and unreasonably dangerous design,” and Jetson knew or should have known that it could short-circuit and cause fires while charging, the family’s lawyers with Kline & Specter PC say. The parents are seeking more than \$75,000.

“We intend to hold the seller and the manufacturer of this dangerous product responsible for the deaths of two innocent young children, and, in doing so, seek to prevent future preventable injury, death and grief from occurring,” the family’s attorney Tom Kline, with the Philadelphia firm, said in a statement.

The suit says Damien Kaufman bought the Jetson hoverboard as a Christmas gift for Brianna Baer in 2018 at a Walmart in Quakertown. On April 1, 2022, Abigail Kaufman was charging the hoverboard in her bedroom when it caught fire, and that led to the house blaze, according to allegations in court papers.

The fire was reported at 12:49 a.m. April 1, started in the southeast corner of a first-floor bedroom and burned across the first floor.

The girls were trapped in Brianna Baer's bedroom on the second floor, the suit says.

Jennifer Lee Kaufman was on the first floor and was able to get out. Damien Kaufman was in a detached garage at the time, according to the suit, and he tried repeatedly to get back into the home.

The parents "stood on the front lawn of their home and watched helplessly" as they waited for fire rescue, according to the suit.

The girls were taken to St. Luke's University Hospital in Fountain Hill. Brianna Baer was pronounced dead at 6:37 a.m., and Abigail Kaufman followed almost two hours later, the lawsuit says. Both died from smoke inhalation and the effects of the fire.

Both parents were taken to the hospital after the fire, as were two police officers who responded.

Witnessing the fire and the subsequent deaths of their daughters has taken a severe emotional and psychological toll on the parents, and both have suffered from depression, nightmares, stress and anxiety, the attorneys said.

Prosecutors previously said the cause of the fire was electrical in nature and the deadly blaze was ruled an accident.

There were four smoke detectors in the home, but prosecutors said heavy damage caused by the fire meant investigators could not determine if they were operational.

The lawsuit specifically says the Jetson hoverboard batteries were subject to degradation, short circuits and electrical shorts or circuit failures at the charging location. The Rogue hoverboards have a "high propensity" to ignite while charging, the suit alleges.

Editor's note: This article was updated with a statement from Walmart.