

## **Driver of tanker truck in fire, explosion on I-75 is identified**

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DETROIT -- The driver of a propane truck that was killed in a fiery crash on Interstate 75 this morning has been identified as **Ronald** Albert **Martinez** of Albion, according to the Michigan State Police.

**Martinez** - who had been a driver for Aero Bulk Carrier, of Grand Rapids - died at about 8:15 a.m. when he apparently lost control of his tanker truck and smashed through a guard rail on northbound Interstate 75 and crashed between the freeway and the Dearborn Street off ramp.

The tanker fell to the ground and exploded, sending fiery debris into the Delray neighborhood near the crash site, Michigan State Police First Lt. Monica Yesh of the Metro South Post said during a televised press briefing. **Martinez** died at the scene, Yesh said. His family was notified earlier today, she said.

"We couldn't get to him," she said. "We do not know why the driver lost control."

After striking the guard rail, the cab separated from the tanker and continued north on the freeway about 200 yards, Yesh said.

She said there was a fire of some sort before the tanker hit the ground and exploded. Fiery debris struck a convenience store and at least one home, located at Melville and Leigh.

"We are a small company," said Aero president Hubert Blough. "We know the driver well."

**Martinez** had rested about 10 hours on a break before the crash, Blough said.

"He had just came off his break," Blough said. "He was fresh for the day."

The intense heat generated by the blast damaged the People's Community Services community center and destroyed its new \$265,000 playground, said Thomas Cervenak, executive director of the nonprofit organization. The playground was dedicated in June 2006.

"I had a great deal of sadness when I saw it because the playground was a project the community helped us with," he said. "It's a state-of-the-art playground and one of the most beautiful things I'd seen. We're really hoping to rebuild."

The playground was accessible to those with physical disabilities. In the summer, it would be jammed with kids playing, feeding geese or participating in youth programs, Cervenak said

The vinyl siding on the community center melted, but the building is otherwise safe for use, Cervenak said. The center offers after-school programming, computer classes, mentoring and a Delray museum.

"We're going to be closed until next week to make sure everything is secure," he said.

Latarsha Davis, her boyfriend, Marco Banner, and her son, Christopher Davis, lived in the home hit by the fiery debris. The wood-frame home was a total loss after the incident. She said her family barely escaped the burning home.

"It was loud as hell," the 35-year-old Davis said. "It shook my whole house."

Davis said she escaped the home wearing only a tank top and jeans. Her son ran out naked and her boyfriend fled in his pajamas and without shoes.

"It was on fire as we were coming out," Davis said.

Four wheels from the truck dangled from the freeway guard rail this morning, which was charred by a blast police estimated shot 80 feet into the air.

An end cap of the tanker blew about 150 feet from the truck and was stopped by a fence, which kept it from hitting other homes.

Banner, 29, said he thought he died.

"I thought the whole house blew up with me in it," he said. "Everything I own is gone."

Banner said he hopes the company that owns the tanker will help his family find a new home.

"It is the middle of the winter," Banner said. "We basically are homeless."

Yesh said the tanker was full or nearly full of a petroleum-based product.

Charles Miller lives with five other people just north of Davis and Banner. He was the only one home at the time of the explosion.

"The explosion knocked me out of bed," the 46-year-old Miller said. "All I saw was a huge ball of flame coming towards my house."

I-75 near the blast site was closed in both directions this morning, but the southbound lanes have since reopened, said Michigan Department of Transportation spokesman Rob Morosi. It could be days before the northbound lanes follow, he said.

"We will take every precaution necessary before we reopen the northbound side," Morosi said during a televised press briefing.

When the freeway shut down, it backed up traffic for miles in both directions. About 106,000 people daily travel that stretch of I-75, according to MDOT.

Alternates include going south on Outer Drive to northbound Fort Street to northbound Livernois to northbound I-75 , according to <a target="new"

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