

Many 'unknowns' in SUV cliff plunge that killed family of 8

Family lived in Woodland

By PAUL ELIAS and PHUONG LE
Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — Nobody answered the door when a child-welfare worker went to the Washington state home of the big, free-spirited Hart family to investigate a neighbor's complaint that the youngsters were going hungry.

Three days later, the Harts' crumpled SUV was found at the bottom of a 100-foot seaside cliff in Northern California, all eight family members presumed dead in a mysterious wreck now under investigation.

"There are a lot of unknowns on this," Mendocino County Sheriff Tom Allman said. "Several of the questions that have been asked today will never be answered."

Investigators have yet to determine the cause of the crash and said there is no reason so far to believe it was intentional. But they also said there were no skid marks or signs the driver braked as the GMC Yukon crossed a flat dirt



Tristan Fortsch/KATU News
The Hart family of Woodland, Wash., at a Bernie Sanders rally in Vancouver, Wash., in 2016.

pull-off area, about 75 feet wide, and went over the edge of the Pacific Coast Highway.

The case has thrown a spotlight on at least one previous run-in with the law by the Harts, along with neighbors' repeated concerns about the way the home-schooled youngsters were being treated.

Some family friends, though, say that doesn't track with their knowledge of the parents, Sarah and Jennifer Hart, as a loving couple who promoted social justice and exposed their "remarkable" children to art, music and nature.

The brood was known as

the Hart Tribe, a multiracial family of two women and six adopted children who grew their own food, took spontaneous road trips to camp and hike, and traveled to festivals and other events, offering free hugs and promoting unity.

One of the children, Devonte Hart, drew national attention after the black youngster was photographed in tears, hugging a white police officer during a 2014 protest in Portland over the deadly police shooting of a black man in Ferguson, Missouri. Devonte was holding a "Free Hugs" sign.

But well before the wreck,



Johnny Huu Nguyen
Portland police Sgt. Bret Barnum, left, and Devonte Hart, 12, hug at a rally in Portland in 2014 where people had gathered in support of the protests in Ferguson, Mo.

Sarah Hart pleaded guilty in 2011 to a domestic assault charge in Douglas County, Minnesota, telling authorities "she let her anger get out of control" while spanking her 6-year-old adoptive daughter, court records show.

Then, last week, Bruce and Dana DeKalb, next-door neighbors of the Harts in Woodland, Washington, called state child protective services on Friday because Devonte, now 15, had been coming over to their house almost every day for a week, asking for food.

Dana DeKalb said Devonte told her his parents were "punishing them by withholding food." The boy asked her to leave food in a box by the fence for him, she said.

Social service authorities opened an investigation, and a state caseworker went to the house last Friday but didn't find anyone home, state officials said. The agency had no prior history with the family, said Norah West, a spokeswoman with the Department

of Social and Health Services.

By Saturday, the family's SUV was gone from the driveway, said Bruce DeKalb.

The wreck was discovered by a passing motorist Monday afternoon. The women, both 38, were found dead inside the SUV, while three of their children — Markis Hart, 19, Jeremiah Hart, 14, and Abigail Hart, 14 — were discovered outside the vehicle.

A team on Thursday continued to search the rugged coastline for the three other children, also believed to have been in the SUV: Hannah Hart, 16, Sierra Hart, 12, and Devonte.

The DeKalbs also recounted that three months after the Harts moved into their house on 2 acres with a fenced pasture last May, one of the girls rang the DeKalbs' doorbell at 1:30 a.m.

She "was at our door in a blanket saying we needed to protect her," Bruce DeKalb said. "She said that they were abusing her." The entire fam-

ily came over to their house the next morning to apologize and explain it was a bad week, Dana DeKalb said.

The sheriff said investigators don't know exactly when or how the SUV went over the cliff, situated alongside a spot commonly used by motorists to walk their pets. Allman appealed to anyone who might have seen the family to come forward.

Accident-reconstruction experts said investigators will look at such factors as the weather, road conditions and the possibility of brake failure, a blown tire or some other malfunction.

That model of Yukon was also presumably equipped with a black box recorder that would show its speed and use of the brakes, said Marcus Mazza, an engineer and accident-reconstruction expert with Lancaster, Pennsylvania-based Robson Forensic.

Family friend Max Ribner took issue with the notion it was something other than a tragic accident. The couple adopted the six children, many of whom came from "hard backgrounds," he said. "They transformed these kids' lives."

"This is a tragic accident of a magnitude that cannot be measured," said Zippy Lomax, a photographer who knew the Harts. "They were really radiant, warm, adventurous, inspiring people. They were always on some grand adventure, and the kids were living this life that was kind of like this dream."

Le reported from Seattle. Associated Press writer Tom James contributed from West Linn.

FIVE-DAY FORECAST FOR ASTORIA

Tonight	Saturday	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday
39	54 / 39	49 / 38	51 / 37	53 / 42
Partly cloudy	Times of sun and clouds	Mostly cloudy with a little rain	Cool with intervals of clouds and sunshine	Mainly cloudy

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ALMANAC

Astoria through Thursday.

Temperatures
 High/low 54°/37°
 Normal high/low 55°/40°
 Record high 73° in 1964
 Record low 28° in 1938

Precipitation
 Thursday 0.00"
 Month to date 4.62"
 Normal month to date 7.01"
 Year to date 23.23"
 Normal year to date 24.40"

REGIONAL WEATHER

Shown is tomorrow's weather. Temperatures are tonight's lows and tomorrow's highs.

SUN AND MOON

Sunset tonight 7:41 p.m.
 Sunrise Saturday 6:58 a.m.
 Moonrise today 7:00 p.m.
 Moonset today 6:58 a.m.

UNDER THE SKY

Tonight's Sky: After 10 p.m., Jupiter is emerging from the eastern horizon.

Source: Jim Todd, OMSI

TOMORROW'S TIDES

Astoria / Port Docks

Time	High	Time	Low
2:04 a.m.	9.1 ft.	8:18 a.m.	0.2 ft.
2:17 p.m.	8.8 ft.	8:33 p.m.	0.1 ft.

NATIONAL CITIES

City	Today	Sat.
Atlanta	66 42 pc	69 47 s
Boston	61 38 r	54 41 s
Chicago	50 38 c	52 22 sh
Denver	63 33 pc	57 27 c
Des Moines	54 42 c	46 22 pc
Detroit	48 33 pc	50 27 r
El Paso	83 55 s	85 58 pc
Fairbanks	32 11 pc	31 24 pc
Honolulu	83 70 s	82 71 pc
Indianapolis	51 35 pc	54 29 sh
Kansas City	55 46 pc	56 26 c
Las Vegas	82 61 s	87 64 pc
Los Angeles	80 57 pc	77 58 pc
Memphis	61 45 c	71 52 pc
Miami	83 69 pc	81 71 c
Nashville	60 41 c	70 49 pc
New Orleans	75 57 pc	75 57 s
New York	62 38 r	58 43 s
Oklahoma City	65 50 s	72 36 c
Philadelphia	65 37 r	58 44 s
St. Louis	54 41 pc	59 30 sh
Salt Lake City	69 49 pc	70 48 c
San Francisco	75 53 pc	69 53 pc
Seattle	57 43 c	60 41 pc
Washington, DC	68 38 c	60 48 s

TOMORROW'S NATIONAL WEATHER

Shown are noon positions of weather systems and precipitation. Temperature bands are highs for the day.

REGIONAL CITIES

City	Today	Sat.
Baker City	64 34 pc	57 31 pc
Bend	63 39 pc	60 36 pc
Brookings	65 49 pc	65 45 pc
Eugene	59 41 pc	63 36 pc
Ilwaco	51 41 c	52 41 pc
Klamath Falls	67 36 pc	65 34 pc
Medford	71 43 pc	72 42 pc
Newberg	60 44 c	63 38 pc
Newport	54 42 c	54 39 pc
North Bend	57 44 pc	58 41 pc
Olympia	57 37 c	60 36 pc
Pendleton	64 40 pc	57 39 pc
Portland	59 44 c	65 41 pc
Roseburg	67 45 pc	69 41 pc
Salem	61 44 c	65 38 pc
Seaside	52 40 c	54 39 pc
Spokane	55 33 pc	51 34 pc
Springfield	62 42 pc	64 38 pc
Vancouver	58 43 c	63 39 pc
Yakima	66 37 pc	64 36 pc

Johnson, Boone to appear at Seaside town hall

The meeting will be from 2 to 3:30 p.m. at Seaside City Hall at 989 Broadway. The state lawmakers are expected to discuss the last legislative session and public-policy issues.

ON THE RECORD

Burglary
 • On Wednesday, Joshua Henry Marshall, 33, was arrested by Astoria police at 18th Street and Franklin Avenue for second-degree burglary. Deputy Police Chief Eric Halvorson said police received a report around 9 p.m. of Marshall breaking into the cafeteria at Columbia Memorial Hospital.

MEMORIAL

Saturday, April 7, 2018
 HOIKKA, Michael W. — A service celebrating Hoikka's life will be held at 1 p.m. at Hood River Alliance Church, 2650 Montello Ave., Hood River. Hoikka is formerly of Astoria.

DEATH

March 27, 2018
 HILLARD, Lanie Rae, 27, of Warrenton, died in Warrenton.

PUBLIC MEETINGS

MONDAY
 Astoria City Council, 7 p.m., City Hall, 1095 Duane St.

LOTTERIES

OREGON
 Thursday's Pick 4:
 1 p.m.: 4-1-3-2
 4 p.m.: 1-5-8-2
 7 p.m.: 4-8-9-5
 10 p.m.: 8-7-4-4

WASHINGTON
 Thursday's Lucky Lines: 01-08-12-16-FREE-20-23-25-31
 Estimated jackpot: \$20,000

THURSDAY'S KENO: 05-06-11-14-17-18-32-35-36-37-39-47-51-52-62-64-69-73-77-79
 Thursday's Match 4: 05-08-15-17

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Obituaries may be edited for spelling, proper punctuation and style. Death notices and upcoming services will be published at no charge. Notices must be submitted by 9 a.m. the day of publication.

Obituaries and notices may be submitted online at www.dailyastorian.com/forms/obits, by email at ewilson@dailyastorian.com, placed via the funeral home or in person at The Daily Astorian office, 949 Exchange St. in Astoria. For more information, call 503-325-3211, ext. 257.

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