

Jurors declare man guilty of girlfriend's death in car

By Beth Kassab | Sentinel Staff Writer
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DELAND -- A Deltona man who prosecutors say was high on ecstasy after partying at a rave club was convicted Wednesday of killing his girlfriend when he lost control of his car on Interstate 4 three years ago.

Prosecutors said Thomas E. Savage swerved and crashed into a "Keep off the Median" sign, which struck the car in such a way that it caused a seat belt to tighten around 24-year-old Heather Marie Kemme's neck, killing her instantly. Savage, now 33, was not wearing a seat belt and was not injured in the crash on April 18, 1999.

Savage stood silently as the verdict was read, declaring him guilty of vehicular homicide. One row back, his mother and sister cried out "No," and began sobbing.

The jury found him not guilty of a second charge of DUI manslaughter.

Assistant State Attorney Brad Sherman said he was "very satisfied" with the verdict and said Savage faces nine years in prison for the crime. Savage will be sentenced next month.

Kemme's mother, Deborah Durand, sat in the courtroom clutching the same photo of her daughter that she held throughout the five-day trial -- a portrait of the young girl with a wide smile and sparkling tiara taken just after she was crowned "Fire Queen" in her hometown of Sidney, N.Y.

"This is bad for everyone," Durand said later. "Heather was so kind and so caring."

Durand, who lives in New York, said she had never heard of Savage until the crash and did not consider him her daughter's boyfriend.

Savage said he had lived with Kemme for about two months in Deltona before she died. They had known each other for about six months, he said.

He said he was not high on drugs during the 2:30 a.m. crash and had not taken Ecstasy that night. He swerved and lost control of the car, he said, because Kemme grabbed him and tried to pull him toward her for a kiss as they were returning from a Daytona Beach

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rave club. At the same time, the car in front of them slowed, he said, causing him to lose control. The force of the impact uprooted the sign and the concrete base jammed against the bottom of the car, which caused the seat belt to break Kemme's neck.

Several pill bottles were found in the car at the crash scene near Deltona. Savage had been prescribed Valium for back pain, he said. According to tests of blood taken by paramedics at the scene of the crash, Savage had Ecstasy and Valium in his system.

Savage had insisted to Florida Highway Patrol investigators that it was Kemme who was driving the car when it crashed. Before the trial started, he admitted he had been behind the wheel.

"His life has changed completely," said Savage's mother, Kathleen Savage. "He just stays in his room. He's a hermit."

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