

DEATH BLAMED ON BROKEN ALARM

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BY KATHY STEVENS
Of The Post and Courier Staff

MOUNT PLEASANT—Edward Coaxum's family whispered goodbye after he died.

Percilla Coaxum's phone rang at 8:45 a.m. Oct. 14. Her cousin's employer told her to go immediately to Medical University Hospital, that he was badly hurt. He had been run over by a garbage truck.

She and Coaxum's mother, Susie Coaxum, were inside the emergency room within 30 minutes.

Doctors told them he had a broken spleen, torn liver, paralysis, internal bleeding, possible brain damage and a 50-50 chance of surviving exploratory surgery.

Ten minutes later, he died.

The family thinks a \$34.75 alarm might have altered the outcome. Their theory is backed by authorities' accounts and a court order aimed at preventing Fennell Container Co. from altering or moving the truck involved in Coaxum's death until experts determine whether the backup alarm worked.

The Coaxums' attorney and family friend Mark Mason filed a motion for a temporary restraining order after Fennell Container, a subsidiary of Republic Waste Inc. of Florida, denied access to the truck for an inspection.

A judge granted that order, and Mason's team determined Wednesday that the beacon had been replaced and the old one thrown away. Also installed on the truck since the accident was a metal bar that would have knocked Coaxum out of the way. Photographs of the truck taken at the scene show an old alarm on the truck and no metal bar.

Republic Waste spokesman Will Flower said he's certain there will be lawsuits and that the condition of the backup alarm would likely be determined in court. He also said the company would "abide by any court order."

"This whole case is about whether their device that would have warned him to get out of the way was working," Mason said. "Not only did they replace it but now can't seem find the old one." Coaxum reported to work at B.P. Cooper River Chemical Plant at 6 a.m. that day to begin a 12-hour shift. He wore the required safety gear — steel-toe boots, a hard hat and ear plugs — while walking toward a utility building past generators humming at 87 decibels, which is about the same noise level as a food processor or blender.

He was walking away from the trash truck that had just emptied a container and was backing up. Stanley Wright, the driver, backed the truck over Coaxum and kept going, dragging the 50-year-old some 30 feet before stopping, according to witnesses listed in a summons filed Tuesday in the Court of Common Pleas for the 9th Judicial Circuit.

A co-worker ran to Coaxum, turned him onto his back and asked whether he needed help, said James Coaxum, one of Coaxum's six brothers. Coaxum talked on the way to the hospital, but his words were indecipherable.

At the site, S.C. Highway Patrol began its investigation. A trooper tested the alarm that should sound automatically when the driver puts the truck in reverse. It didn't work. Investigators concluded the "proximate cause of the collision was the failure of the ... audible warning beacon," the summons said.

S.C. Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation's office of Occupational Safety and Health Administration is investigating B.P. and Fennell Container, said OSHA spokeswoman Lesia Kudelka. Investigators will determine if safety rules were followed. Officials will scrutinize, among other things, daily inspection logs required of Fennell Container's drivers.

Flower said drivers conduct pre- and post-trip inspections of their trucks daily, checking everything from tires to alarms. A log lists condition of all items. Broken items are reported to maintenance for repair.

OSHA will not comment on the investigation until its completion six to nine weeks from now.

Coaxum, the fourth of 10 children and the family's anchor, set the standard for some of his younger siblings and cousins who grew up in a cluster of houses on two acres on Snowden Road, near Long Point Road in Mount Pleasant.

Coaxum never married and took the role of caretaker, looking out for his 75-year-old widowed mother, an aunt and a couple of dozen nieces and nephews. The children loved him, as did his brothers, who counted on his generosity, guidance and understanding.

"We wanted to be like him, go with him," James Coaxum said, recalling their childhood. "He took care of me and looked out for me. Whenever I got in a bind, he was there."

Percilla Coaxum, along with the others, doesn't want to accept her cousin's death.

"I saw him Sunday never thinking that was the last time I'd see him alive," she said, then paused and pressed her thumbs to brow as if to push away tears that came anyway. "I just waved at him. I could've just taken one more minute to talk to him. I've learned now to be more like him, to slow down and just take life easy."