

Explosion in car injures 3 teens

Huffing , lighting cigarette to blame

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Pierrette J. Shields and Jason Gonzales,

LONGMONT — An explosion inside a car that injured three teenagers Thursday afternoon was sparked when one of the girls lit a cigarette and ignited fumes from aerosol air fresheners the teens had been huffing, police said.

The explosion totaled the Toyota sedan they were sitting in at a parking lot at McIntosh Lake near Harvard Street and Wedgwood Avenue during the lunch hour. An 18-year-old woman and 16-year-old girl suffered first-degree burns, while a 16-year-old who was in the back seat suffered second-degree burns. They were all treated at Longmont United Hospital, Longmont police Cmdr. Tim Lewis said.

“It appears that the people in the vehicle were abusing household aerosol chemicals and that was ignited when one of the girls lit a cigarette,” Lewis said.

Some people inhale fumes from common household chemicals, like aerosols, to get high. The practice is commonly called huffing.

“We have not charged them, obviously, but there is that potential,” Lewis said. “It is illegal to huff toxic vapors.”

He said fire officials remarked it was miraculous that the force of the explosion didn't more seriously injure or kill any of the teenagers, given the extensive damage to the Toyota. The force of the explosion blew out all of the windows, launched the sunroof into a nearby tree and badly damaged the car's body. A city forester helped investigators retrieve the sunroof from the tree, Lewis said.

The fumes from the strawberry-raspberry and mango-pineapple aerosols also had worked their way into the car's ventilation system, according to police.

“The dash was just disintegrated inside that car,” Lewis said.

Two men working on an underground electrical line near an outbuilding at the lake were the first to reach the teens after the explosion.

Josh Schafer and C.J. Earhart said the teens were at the lake's parking lot for about an hour listening to music loudly before the explosion.

“We were working on the other side of the building and after the boom, it sounded like a cat was screaming. After we came around the corner we saw it was a girl,” Schafer said.

When the men reached the car, the girl who was sitting in the back seat was already crawling out of a window and the other two girls were sitting in the car, they said. Both men said there was no fire and they noticed a sweet scent just before it was overpowered by the smell of burned hair.

The men said they tried to help the other passenger and driver out of the car.

“The driver just wanted to leave. She put it in reverse, and I told her to stop the car,” Earhart said. “After she stopped the car, she told us she was fine. She was acting weird and trying to stuff stuff behind the center panel.”

After getting the teens out of the car, Earhart called police.

Investigators said neighbors said the explosion was so loud that they initially believed it was from an electrical station near the lake.

Lewis said none of the victims attends school.

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Police refer teens in ‘huffing’ explosion to justice program

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Pierrette J. Shields, Longmont Times-Call

LONGMONT — Longmont police referred three teens to a restorative justice program after they were injured last month in a car explosion ignited when one of them lit a cigarette after they had been inhaling aerosols in the parked Toyota, according to police.

An 18-year-old woman and two 16-year-old girls who were injured when the Toyota sedan blew up Oct. 23 can avoid a criminal conviction if they complete the program, said Cmdr. Tim Lewis of the Longmont Police Department.

He said the 18-year-old driver was ticketed on suspicion of abusing toxic vapors and contributing to the delinquency of a minor. The 16-year-old girl who was seated in the front passenger seat of the car was ticketed on suspicion of

abusing toxic vapors, and the 16-year-old in the back seat was ticketed on suspicion of abusing toxic vapors and fourth-degree arson.

“We’ve had very good success with the restorative justice programs, and we believe these girls learned a very important lesson,” Lewis said Wednesday, explaining why the teens were offered the alternative to court prosecution. “There is a lot more accountability that comes through restorative justice sometimes.”

The explosion totaled the Toyota sedan they were sitting in at a parking lot at McIntosh Lake near Harvard Street and Wedgwood Avenue during the lunch hour. Lewis said the teens cooperated with the police investigation.

The girls were “huffing” air fresheners in the enclosed cabin of the car. Some people inhale the chemicals from aerosols to get high. Witnesses said the car had been in the parking lot with the girls inside for about an hour before the explosion, which injured all three. They were treated at Longmont United Hospital.

Lewis said last month that fire officials noted it was miraculous that the force of the explosion didn’t more seriously injure or kill any of the teenagers, given the extensive damage to the Toyota. The explosion blew out all of the windows, launched the sunroof into a nearby tree and badly damaged the car’s body. A city forester helped investigators retrieve the sunroof from the tree.

The fumes from the strawberry-raspberry and mango-pineapple aerosols also had worked their way into the car’s ventilation system, according to police, which added to the force of the explosion in the car when the fumes were ignited.

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Second chance for huffers

Community ‘circle’ to decide consequences for Longmont teens

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Pierrette J. Shields, Longmont Times-Call

LONGMONT — Three teens injured last month in a huffing-related explosion will have to face one another and numerous people who were affected by the incident as part of their restorative-justice sentence.

An 18-year-old woman and two 16-year-old girls were injured when one of the girls tried to light a cigarette in the enclosed cabin of a car in which they were huffing aerosol air fresheners on Oct. 23, according to police.

The three can avoid criminal convictions in the explosion — which totaled the car and left the three of them with burns — if they successfully complete a restorative-justice program at Teaching Peace.

If they do not complete the program, they will be referred back to the criminal justice system, said Deb Witzel, executive director of Teaching Peace.

Police ticketed the 18-year-old driver on suspicion of abusing toxic vapors and contributing to the delinquency of a minor. The 16-year-old girl who was seated in the front passenger seat of the car was ticketed on suspicion of abusing toxic vapors, and the 16-year-old in the back seat was ticketed on suspicion of abusing toxic vapors and fourth-degree arson.

By accepting the restorative-justice option, the teens admitted to the charges and agreed to work through the program to avoid the criminal conviction, Witzel said. However, the police records will remain.

“We’re starting with a guilty plea and going from there,” Witzel said.

Cmdr. Tim Lewis of the Longmont Police Department said last month that fire officials noted it was miraculous that the force of the explosion didn’t more seriously injure or kill any of the teenagers, given the extensive damage to the Toyota. The explosion blew out all of the windows, launched the sunroof into a nearby tree and badly damaged the car’s body. A city forester helped investigators retrieve the sunroof from the tree.

Under the program, the teens will face one another and a gathering of other people who were affected by the explosion and its aftermath. Witzel said that could include police, firefighters, witnesses or even the city forester. She estimates it will take about six weeks to organize the “circle.” Two facilitators from Teaching Peace will guide the process.

“Once the circle is gathered, the process is to have each person talk about how they have been affected, and that includes the girls,” Witzel said. “Everybody in this circle is going to have that kind of a voice, because everybody is going to be impacted somehow.”

A person who claimed to be one of the teens and posted a comment about the explosion on TimesCall.com last week responded Tuesday to an e-mail and said the teens are all recovering quickly from their injuries.

Those gathered will help select and develop the sentence that the teens will have to complete in order to finish the program. Witzel said the result is limited only by the creativity of those gathered.

However, she said it is difficult to predict the outcomes.

“I don’t have any idea what these girls will do, and I want to be really clear that restorative justice is not about punishment. It is about accountability,” Witzel said.

She said letters of apology are common, as is restitution or community service. Because the teens were sitting in a car when others their age were in school, Witzel said, there likely will be a component about ensuring that the teens are pursuing educational opportunities.

“We look at what there is in each person’s life to build upon,” she said.

Teenagers in huffing explosion sentenced through justice program

Pierrette J. Shields, Longmont Times-Call

Dec. 17, 2008

LONGMONT — Three teenagers injured in October in a huffing-related explosion have until May to complete a contractual sentence made through a local restorative justice program.

An 18-year-old woman and two 16-year-old girls were injured when one of the girls tried to light a cigarette in a car in which they were huffing aerosol air fresheners on Oct. 23, according to police. The car was parked in a lot near McIntosh Lake.

Police ticketed the 18-year-old driver on suspicion of abusing toxic vapors and contributing to the delinquency of a minor. The 16-year-old girl in the front passenger seat of the car was ticketed on suspicion of abusing toxic vapors, and the 16-year-old in the back seat was ticketed on suspicion of abusing toxic vapors and fourth-degree arson.

The three can avoid criminal convictions in the explosion — which totaled the car and left the three of them with burns — if they complete their contracts. If they do not complete the program, they will be referred back to the criminal justice system, Deb Witzel, executive director of Teaching Peace, said in November.

By accepting the restorative-justice option, the teens admitted to the charges and agreed to work through the program to avoid the criminal conviction, Witzel said. However, the police records will remain.

The teens met this month at Teaching Peace with people affected by the explosion, including two police officers, a volunteer fireman, three adult community members, two volunteer facilitators and one advocate for each of the teens.

Each of the people who participated in the community circle worked to determine what each of the teens will have to accomplish to complete the program.

Each teen was assigned an individual educational goal, Witzel said. All will have to write letters of “apology and reflection” to the people affected by the explosion; research and write an educational presentation for school resource officers to use or for their own use; and participate in CPR classes, drug testing, an employment search, and 10 hours a month in a recreational program to get exercise.

A Longmont police officer and the Longmont Community Justice Partnership will monitor the teens’ progress.

“Approximately 90 percent of the offenders complete their agreements and, of those, an average of only 10 percent reoffend within the time frame recidivism is most likely to occur,” Witzel wrote in an e-mail about the sentence, noting recidivism is most likely within one year.

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