

# Connecticut LawTribune

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## Girl's Death Sparks Race Debate

Lawyer says suburban drug buyers hurting Bridgeport

BY THOMAS B. SCHEFFEY

**M**ichael Stratton is not the first person to offer the hypothesis: A significant percentage of the crime in Bridgeport involves white suburbanites who drive into the city to buy drugs.

But the New Haven plaintiffs' attorney's comments have nevertheless touched a raw nerve, perhaps because he is at the center of a lawsuit that has race and class overtones. Stratton is representing the family of a 20-month-old black girl who was killed by a drunk, white driver from the largely upper middle-class town of Monroe.

"We view this as another example of white people from the suburbs coming into the city and wreaking havoc, which is exactly what Clayton Luf did here," Stratton, who is white, told the *Connecticut Post* in late September.

On July 4, Luf left Ray's Grill in Stratford, a town just east of Bridgeport. Driving along Connecticut Avenue in Bridgeport, he lost control of his Mercedes convertible, crashed through a fence and struck Kay'Anah "Kay Kay" Brayboy. Luf had blood alcohol levels of 0.25 percent, more than three times the legal limit.

In addition to the family's lawsuit, he faces criminal charges of second-degree manslaughter, driving while intoxicated and reckless driving.

With insurance money available, Stratton acknowledges the case will probably settle before trial. But he said the girl's family wants more than money. They want to give the tragedy larger meaning.

"This little girl's death is a microcosm of a much larger problem. It's an issue of race and class, of the haves and the have-nots," Stratton told the *Law Tribune*. "This is a typical low-income Bridgeport neighbor-



MICHAEL STRATTON

hood. I've sat with the family and talked about this a great deal. The reason that we believe Luf was there was to party, to buy drugs. There are a lot of people who come in, not from the neighborhood, in SUVs and BMWs."

M. Hatcher "Reese" Norris, of Hartford's Butler, Norris & Gold, is defending Luf. "No lawyer should ever think it's his role to instigate a race war or a class war," Norris said in an interview. "These statements are outrageous, particularly the ignorant statements regarding drugs . . . . To assert that my client was there to purchase drugs is an outrageous false statement," Norris proclaimed.

"I have the medical records and drug screen in front of me. You can't misinterpret the word 'negative,'" said Norris.

A former federal prosecutor, Norris added, "It's my belief that if a prosecutor made these [inflammatory] statements he'd lose his job ... for injecting race into something that has nothing to do with race."

### Study In Contrasts

The demographic facts are undeniable. Bridgeport has a minority population of about 55 percent, while Monroe is about 95 percent white. The average household in Bridgeport makes less than \$40,000 a year, the typical Monroe household about \$90,000.

There is almost no violent crime in Monroe. Bridgeport had more than 1,500 violent incidents as recently as 2004, though the crime rate has declined over the past decade.

There is no question that Bridgeport is blacker, poorer and has more crime than Monroe and other suburbs. The more difficult question is whether suburbanites come into Bridgeport in large numbers to buy drugs, and whether they are supporting a criminal subculture.

Those who wrote letters to the *Connecticut Post* and left comments on the paper's web site dismiss the notion and are furious at Stratton for making it the focal point of the "Kay Kay" Brayboy case. "What does race have to do with this story?" asked one person posting on the web site. Others called Stratton a "moron" and a "racist jerk."

But the truth is that in the 1990s many shared Stratton's viewpoint. Newspaper stories reported how Bridgeport residents could sit on their front porches and watch fancy cars with beach stickers from Stratford, Fairfield and Westport pass by.

Not only did the out-of-towners support gangs that trafficked in crack cocaine, but they became victims when thugs stole their money, their jewelry, even their cars.

“At least half of the violence—including homicides—that takes place here is related to a drug market demand of out-of-town buyers,” then-Police Chief Thomas J. Sweeney told the *New York Times* in 1992. “The blood is on their hands.”

Current Bridgeport Mayor John M. Fabrizi acknowledges “that was the perception then.” But times have changed, he argued. Community policing has helped cut down on crime, he said.

Yes, said Fabrizi, suburbanites still drive into Bridgeport looking for a good time. But instead of buying drugs, they entertain themselves at sports arenas, restaurants and theaters that weren’t around in the 1990s.

Some suburbanites also work in Bridgeport; the mayor pointed out that Luf owns a body shop in the city.

Bridgeport Police Lt. James M. Viadero agreed that Bridgeport saw a dramatic increase in drug-related crime in the 1990s. “That has subsided considerably,” he maintained last week.

Do suburbanites still come to Bridgeport to buy drugs? “The truth is narcotics are more readily available in urban areas than the suburbs,” said Viadero. “I’m not going to say that it doesn’t happen, but we’ve seen a decline in it.”

### **More Than Sympathy**

Stratton said there has been no shortage of sympathy for the family of the little girl. But he said that’s not enough. “Sympathy’s free,” he said. “It does cost something when you say, ‘Why is this happening? Why are we allowing violent wastelands to develop in the inner cities that are financed by suburbanites?’”

He advocates forming a council of suburban and inner-city leaders to explore how

Connecticut’s rich suburbs can help its beleaguered big cities.

Stratton is somewhat apologetic for his choice of words in the initial interview with the Bridgeport newspaper. He said the color of the suburbanites’ skin really makes no difference. “I don’t believe there’s a need to get into a race war. I think it’s a class war, and it’s about the suburban people abdicating their responsibilities to the cities.”

Stratton, whose firm donates time and money to nonprofit agencies that serve the poor, does not appear ready to let the issue drop. As recently as last Thursday, he appeared on a New Haven radio station’s morning show, where he was grilled on the issue by the hosts.

“Here in Connecticut, we don’t have the Al Sharptons ...the people who change public policy by putting their neck out there. There comes a time to not always think like a politician,” said Stratton. “I’m doing what I think is right.” ■