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Parents of CHOP physician killed riding her bike in Center City sue the drunk driver who hit her

The parents of Barbara Friedes, the 30-year-old Children's Hospital of Philadelphia doctor killed on her bike in 2024, sued drunk driver Michael Vahey.



A photo of Barbara Friedes rests against a tree during a vigil on the 1800 block of Spruce Street in Philadelphia in 2024.

A white bicycle marks the spot on Spruce Street where a drunk driver struck and killed Barbara Friedes in July 2024. The 30-year-old doctor's death led to an outpouring of grief from her loved ones, Children's Hospital of Philadelphia colleagues, and the cyclist community.

Two years later, the driver is in prison but the pediatric resident's parents are still seeking justice.

John and Mary Dietrick have sued Michael Vahey, who was driving his Volkswagen intoxicated at roughly 60 mph in a 25-mph zone when he hit Friedes as she was riding her bike near Rittenhouse Square. His blood alcohol limit exceeded the legal threshold for intoxication.



Mary Dietrick (right) is embraced by her husband, John Dietrick, as she speaks about her daughter Barbara Friedes at a vigil in 2024. David Maialetti / Staff Photographer

Vahey, 70, pleaded guilty to third-degree murder, homicide by vehicle while driving under the influence, and related charges. He was sentenced last year to six to 20 years in prison.

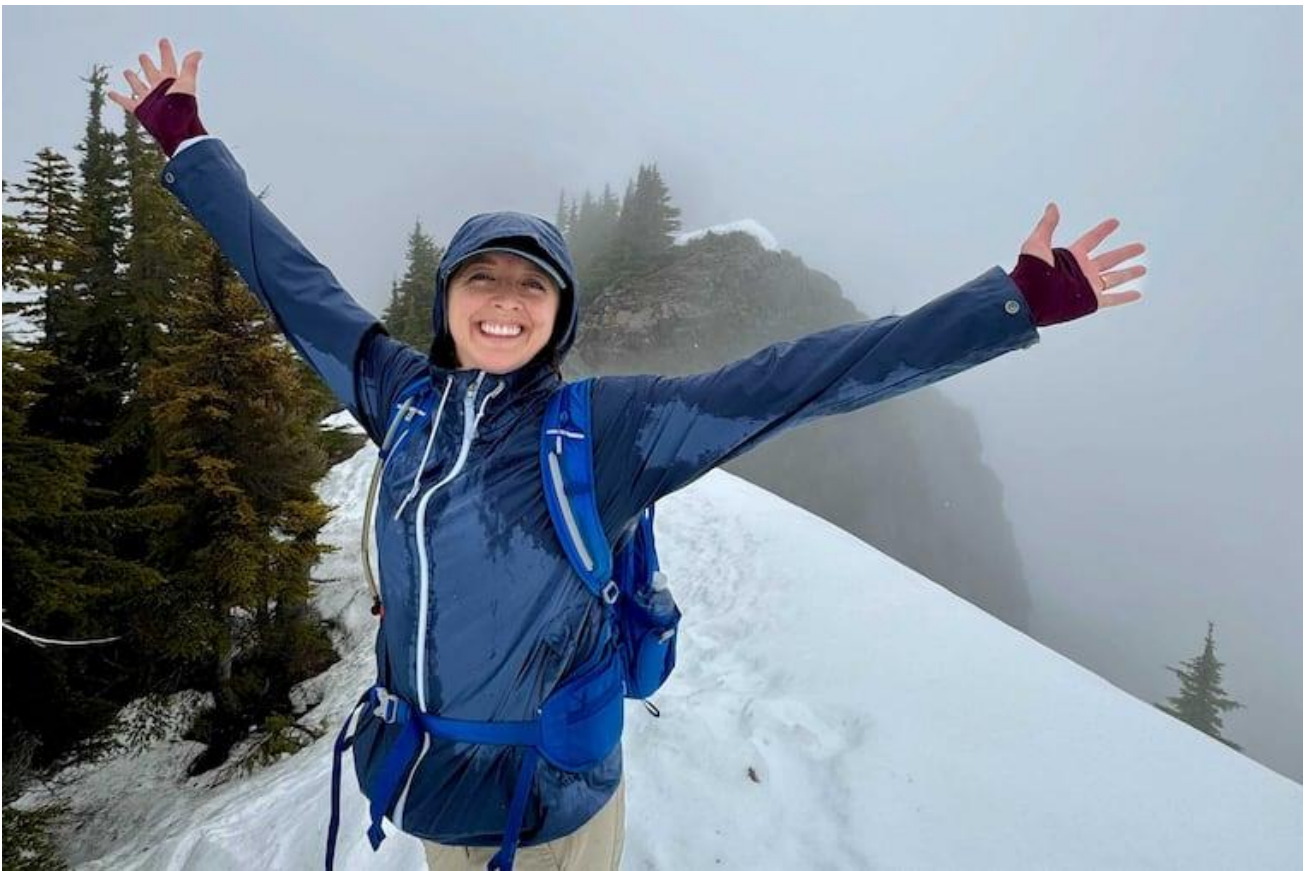
The lawsuit seeks “the full measure of damages available under Pennsylvania law for Vahey’s negligent, reckless, and outrageous conduct causing her death and the immeasurable loss to Barbara’s family,” according to the complaint, which was filed Monday in Common Pleas Court.

Friedes was riding her bicycle on the 1800 block of Spruce Street in the designated bike lane on the evening of July 17, 2024. Intoxicated, Vahey sped through Center City at an “outrageous speed,” the suit says.

“His foot never left the accelerator of his car as he struck Barbara,” according to the complaint.

Amato Sanita, an attorney who represented Vahey in his criminal case, said in a statement that his heart goes out to all parties involved in the tragedy.

Friedes was a chief resident physician at CHOP and applied for fellowship training in pediatric oncology. She was remembered by her colleagues for her kindness and compassion.



Barbara Friedes was killed when a man driving a Volkswagen hit her from behind while she was riding her bike in the bike lane on the 1800 block of Spruce Street. Courtesy Cole Friedes

Her husband, Cole Friedes, said his wife of three years loved children, devoted her career to them, and longed to be a mother.

“She was the kindest person I’ve ever met in my entire life,” he told *The Inquirer* after her death. “She taught me the true meaning of kindness.”

Friedes’ killing sparked protest and public discourse over traffic safety. Hundreds of cyclists filled the streets of Center City following the incident, calling for infrastructure improvements to protect bike lanes.

Mayor Cherelle L. Parker joined a symbolic ride of unity later that summer with activists who criticized her administration for not taking action to make bike lanes safer.

City transportation officials in fall 2024 recommended \$4.8 million in safety upgrades to bike lanes along Pine and Spruce Streets that would include concrete barriers. And in December 2024, Parker signed a law that prohibits motor vehicles from stopping in city-designated bicycle lanes.

Some residents of Pine and Spruce Streets filed a lawsuit over the planned upgrades. The case is ongoing.

The parents’ lawsuit does not name any defendants except Vahey and stays away from the debate over bike lane infrastructure.

“The primary purpose of this lawsuit is to establish full accountability under the civil justice system,” said Tom Kline, a Kline & Specter attorney representing the Dietricks. “It is the second half of the equation.”