

THE MORNING CALL

Lawsuit blames Walmart, hoverboard manufacturer for Hellertown fire that killed two girls

By Daniel Patrick Sheehan

The Morning Call

Sep 21, 2022

Investigators comb through a destroyed home in Hellertown following a fatal fire early Friday. Two girls, ages 10 and 15, were trapped on the second floor, borough police said. Although they were rescued by firefighters, they succumbed to their injuries. (Monica Cabrera / The Morning Call)

The parents of two girls killed in a Hellertown house fire in April have sued a hoverboard manufacturer and Walmart, saying a defective hoverboard charging in a bedroom sparked the blaze.

The suit alleges that the Jetson Rogue hoverboard purchased at a Quakertown Walmart as a Christmas gift in 2018 had a “defective and unreasonably dangerous design” and the manufacturer, Jetson Electric Bikes, knew or should have known that it could short-circuit and cause fires while charging.

Jetson and Walmart nevertheless continued to market, sell and advertise the hoverboard, the suit says.

Brianna Baer, 15, and Abigail Kaufman, 10, were trapped on the second floor of their Linden Avenue home when the fire erupted April 1. Their mother, Jennifer Lee Kaufman, escaped from the first floor. Their father, Damien Kaufman, who was in the detached garage when the fire broke out, tried unsuccessfully to reach the girls.

Firefighters rescued the girls but they succumbed to their injuries at St. Luke’s University Hospital in Fountain Hill.

Jetson could not be reached for comment. Walmart issued a statement: “Our thoughts go out to the Kaufman family for their loss. We expect our suppliers to provide safe, quality products that meet all applicable laws and regulations. We will respond with the Court as appropriate after we are served with the complaint.”

About a week after the fire, Northampton County officials concluded it was “electrical in nature” but said the specific cause remained under investigation. Fire officials could not be reached for comment about whether the cause was ever pinpointed.

Philadelphia attorney Tom Kline, who is representing the Kaufmans, said an independent investigation showed the hoverboard was to blame.

“We conducted a thorough cause-and-origin investigation with multiple experts in which we carefully evaluated the evidence not only from the fire scene itself but also did an inspection of the hoverboard,” he said in a phone interview. “We are convinced based on our careful and thorough investigation that the hoverboard is responsible.”

The suit, filed Wednesday in U.S. District Court, contends the hoverboard’s batteries were subject to short circuits and degradation, and that the product was not adequately tested before distribution and sale. It alleges the defendants “knowingly, purposely and consciously concealed their knowledge of these serious dangers.”

The manufacturer’s manual and website fail to acknowledge the risk of the product and that the defendants engaged in “negligent, reckless, fraudulent and/or outrageous conduct,” the suit says.

Kline said the suit, which seeks unspecified damages for the deeply traumatized Kaufmans, would not only hold the manufacturer and retailer responsible but help prevent other such incidents from happening.

Jetson, which sells hoverboards, electric bikes and scooters, was founded in 2012. Its website says the Rogue Hoverboard — which sells for \$170 but is currently unavailable — has a lithium battery with a two-hour charging time.

Damien Kaufman bought the board as a Christmas present for Brianna. Abigail was charging the board in her bedroom but the girls were in Brianna’s bedroom when the fire started, the suit says.

On its website, the Consumer Product Safety Commission says it is aware of 250 incidents since 2015 involving hoverboards that have caught fire or overheated. Among them was a March 2017 house fire in Harrisburg that killed a 2-year-old girl and a 10-year-old girl.

The site lists 17 hoverboard recalls issued by manufacturers and retailers from July 2016 to November 2017. None involved Walmart or Jetson Electric Bikes.