

The Philadelphia Inquirer

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

PENNSYLVANIA NEWS

by Daniel Patrick Sheehan, Allentown Morning Call

Published Sep 21, 2022

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

The suit alleges that the Jetson Rogue Hoverboard purchased at a Quakertown Walmart 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. Nevertheless, the companies 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 on the first floor 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.

Neither company could immediately be reached for comment.

About a week after the fire, Northampton County officials concluded it was “electrical in nature” but said the specific cause remained under investigation.

The suit, filed in U.S. Eastern District Court, alleges the defendants “knowingly, purposely and consciously concealed their knowledge of these serious dangers.”

It says 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.”

“We intend to hold the seller and the manufacturer of this dangerous product responsible for the deaths of two innocent young children, and, in doing so, seek to prevent future

preventable injury, death and grief from occurring,” said Tom Kline, of Kline & Specter, PC, the firm representing the Kaufmans.

The suit also claims the hoverboard’s batteries were subject to short circuits and degradation, and that the product was not adequately tested before distribution and sale.

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

The suit says Damien Kaufman bought the board in 2018 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. on involved Walmart of Jetson Electric Bikes.