

DNA Evidence Links Suspect in Treasure Island Grand Theft Auto Case

Case # TI15-18384

On October 7, 2015, a male victim reported his vehicle had been stolen while at CJ's on the Island bar between 2:00 and 4:00 am on the previous night. The victim reported he did not initially believe his vehicle had been stolen from the bar parking lot, but rather thought he misplaced it due to his intoxicated state and the possibility a female friend had moved it. The victim stated his friend was sleeping in the passenger seat at the time he went inside the bar.

The victim reported he received a phone call, advising his vehicle had been involved in a hit-and-run crash in Gibsonton, Florida in which two people had been injured. The driver fled the scene, and the crash was investigated by the Florida Highway Patrol. The female friend accompanied the victim at the time he reported his vehicle stolen to Officer Lovelace. The friend informed Officer Lovelace another female who had ridden with her and the victim to the bar was the driver at the time of the crash. The friend reported "Melissa" had left her purse in the vehicle after the crash and fled from the scene.

The victim reported this suspect whom he barely knew took his vehicle without permission by taking his keys from inside the bar. The victim requested a Grand Theft Auto (GTA) investigation and stated he would prosecute.

During Officer Lovelace's investigation, she was able to identify the female who rode with the victim and his friend on the night of the theft as Melissa Sampson. When Officer Lovelace initially contacted Sampson, she was in a Tampa hospital for injuries she claimed were caused from falling from a bicycle. Sampson denied being the driver; however, she made comments to imply the victim and his friend were lying and were responsible for the hit-and-run crash.

Officer Lovelace investigated and found the Florida Highway Patrol had located a purse inside the vehicle at the time of the crash. The purse was a key piece of evidence to prove Sampson had been in the vehicle. Officer Lovelace tracked down the victim's vehicle, obtained permission from the insurance company to seize the airbag as evidence and requested Treasure Island Detective Trent Taylor respond and obtain the air bag as evidence. The driver's air bag was submitted for DNA analysis, and on April 9, 2016, Officer Lovelace received notification from the Pinellas County Forensic DNA Lab a match occurred between the major DNA profile obtained from the airbag and her suspect, Melissa Sampson.

Based on this information, Officer Lovelace issued a probable cause arrest affidavit to charge Melissa Sampson with Grand Theft Auto. As a result, Sampson was arrested on April 15, 2016 by the Largo Police Department. Post Miranda, Sampson denied being the driver of the vehicle although she was not aware of the DNA evidence at that time.

The case is now pending in court. Additional charges are pending for Leaving the Scene of a Traffic Crash with Injuries.