

# Man sentenced to seven years for fatal hit-and-run, attempted cover-up

A Middlesex County man who struck and killed a female pedestrian in Linden in 2017 before attempting to cover up the crime has been sentenced to seven years in state prison, acting Union County Prosecutor Michael A. Monahan announced Friday.

State Superior Court Judge Lisa Miralles Walsh imposed the sentence on Michael Nicholson, 52, of the Colonia section of Woodbridge, who had pleaded guilty last month to charges including second-degree leaving the scene of a fatal accident and third-degree witness tampering in connection with the death of 62-year-old Donna Babbs of the Vauxhall section of Union Township.

At approximately 1 p.m. on Thursday, August 24, 2017, Nicholson was driving a 2001 Nissan Altima east on East St. Georges Avenue (Route 27) in Linden when he disregarded a red light at the intersection with Washington Avenue just as Babbs was wheeling a piece of luggage across the street, according to Union County Assistant Prosecutor Colleen Ruppert, who prosecuted the case.

Babbs was thrown into the air and landed on the pavement just as a passing vehicle's dash camera caught the entire incident on video. Nicholson initially stopped, got out of his vehicle, and walked over to Babbs, but then returned to his car, removed her piece of luggage from underneath the bumper, and sped away, Ruppert said. Shortly thereafter, Babbs was pronounced dead at the scene.

Nicholson abandoned his car in Newark, then unsuccessfully attempted to convince an acquaintance to help him by

withholding evidence from police. But by that point a fast-moving investigation by the Linden Police Department Traffic Bureau, assisted by the Union County Homicide Task Force and the police departments in Bound Brook, Perth Amboy, Roselle, and Woodbridge, resulted in him being identified as a suspect, and he was arrested at his home without incident within hours of the crash.

The victim's niece, holding aloft large posters containing photos of Babbs, read a statement into the record during Friday morning's sentencing hearing, describing her aunt as a dynamic figure who "blessed this earth with beauty" and was named Miss Union County in 1977, exhibiting a passion for jazz, tap dancing, and ballet.

Nicholson repeatedly expressed remorse and apologized to the victim's family during the hearing, but Judge Walsh noted that the apparent guilt was nowhere to be found in the immediate aftermath of the crime.

"There was no mistaking the fact that she (Babbs) was not going to survive," Walsh said. "Yet he (Nicholson) was going to go make himself feel better by medicating himself with heroin."

It was never determined whether Nicholson was under the influence of heroin at the time of Babbs's death, but it was established that he acquired and used a large quantity after he drove to Newark. He and his attorney said in court that the incident prompted him to seek to rid himself of a decades-long addiction to the drug.

"Only because somebody has died at his hand," Ruppert said, "does he now take seriously his addiction."