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Train crash devastates ambulance service, spares stroke patient

By AP

A horrific train crash with an ambulance may have killed the three paramedics inside, but they succeeded in saving their patient. Aeda Gayton couldn't believe the irony that her mother, moments after suffering a stroke, survived and the emergency workers didn't. Charlene Gayton, 68, of Fulton remained in stable condition Sunday in a Texarkana, Texas, hospital after suffering a stroke Saturday. She survived the crash just outside her mobile home while her three rescuers, EMTs Jeff Ferrand, 37, and John Rook, 23, of Hope and Christopher Klingan, 23, of Texarkana, Texas, were thrown from the ambulance and killed. A quarter of the paramedics at Hope-based Pafford Ambulance are gone, officially because Ferrand failed to yield to the oncoming Union Pacific train. But Pafford paramedic Josie Carlton, who was the first on the scene after the crash, told KTHV-TV in Little Rock that she thinks there's another explanation for why the ambulance was caught on the tracks when the train approached the rural crossing. "I feel like something distracted (Ferrand) in the back or outside the ambulance," she said. "We're not sure at this point." Neither are the Arkansas State Police, who are investigating, although Cpl. Darren Neal told The Associated Press "we'll probably never know why the ambulance stopped." The accident happened about 50 yards from Gayton's mobile home, and Aeda Gayton, 35, chased after the ambulance, trying to warn them the train was coming. She doesn't think Ferrand realized the train was so close. "Something in my heart told me he didn't see the train coming," she told the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette. "It was so quick, quick, quick." Carlton said it was particularly difficult to respond to the scene of the accident when the three victims were like her brothers. "The cops came flooding to me saying come help us, come help us," she said. "And I thought, OK, Josie, this is your job. Do the best you can." According to what the train's engineer told police, Ferrand tried to back up after going onto the tracks. Neal said he needed just a few more feet to back out of the range of train, which clipped the right front bumper. The force of the massive train, even though it was going only 48 mph and had engaged the emergency brake, sent the ambulance spinning. Ferrand and Rook died almost immediately after being thrown from the ambulance. Klingan was taken to a hospital and remained in critical condition most of the day Saturday but died Saturday evening, Neal said. There is a crossbuck sign, but no gates or lights at the crossing 125 miles southwest of Little Rock. Train engineer John Harris told police he saw the ambulance start to cross the tracks at about 1:30 Saturday afternoon and blew the horn, rang the bell and applied the emergency brake. Harris said the ambulance suddenly stopped and tried to back up. The 6,126-foot train, with five engines and 99 cars, took 4,046 feet to stop after hitting the ambulance, Neal said. It was Aeda Gayton who dragged her mother from the gnarled ambulance, still on her gurney, and took her the rest of the way to Christ-St. Michael's Hospital in Texarkana, Texas. Her fiancé and sister helped, she said. "I crawled through a broken window," Aeda Gayton said. "My mother was looking around. She was strapped down. We kicked and pried and pulled and kicked and pried until we got her out."