

# ATLANTIC COUNTY PROSECUTOR'S OFFICE

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**Prosecutor**

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## NEWS RELEASE

For immediate release

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**MAYS LANDING** – Superior Court Judge Albert Garofolo sentenced a Hammonton man to nine years in prison today for the 2008 drunken driving crash that killed Atlantic County Corrections Officer John Cruz, Atlantic County Prosecutor Ted Housel stated.

Anthony Ruggiero, 31, who entered a guilty plea in February to Aggravated Manslaughter and Driving Under the Influence, must serve 85 percent of his prison term before being eligible for parole. Upon release, his license will be suspended for two years and an ignition lock will be installed in his vehicle for three years. In addition, the defendant must pay fines and upon release, will be subject to five years of parole supervision.

On Jan. 14, 2008 at 6:12 p.m., Ruggiero had been drinking at his home and was on his way to a liquor store when the collision occurred. It was determined that the defendant was traveling more than 70-miles-per-hour when he slammed into the victim's vehicle just as he was pulling out of the driveway to his South Egg Harbor Road home. Upon impact, Cruz' vehicle burst into flames and he was trapped inside. At the time of the collision Ruggiero had a blood alcohol content of between .27% and .29%, nearly triple the legal limit, Prosecutor Housel said.

During an emotional sentencing hearing today several of the victim's family and friends were present, including sons Christopher Cruz and John Cruz Jr., his daughter Jessica Cruz and his sister Sonia Cruz-Bermudez.

Cruz-Bermudez, addressed the court prior to the Judge imposing sentence. She turned to the defendant and spoke of how her brother was the rock of the family, and that he was one of three siblings she lost in a short period of time. She told Ruggiero that he has caused a great deal of pain to this close-knit family. As she read the letter she paused several times and struggled to hold back tears. Other family members also spoke about the loss. Victim/Witness Advocate Jacqueline Simonson read letters from John Jr. and Jessica. John Jr. called his father a superhero, the center of the family's universe. Jessica said she was "Daddy's little girl" and that since his death she has suffered emotional problems, had trouble in college and developed an eating disorder. She said that before counseling her brother Christopher, who witnessed the crash and

tried, unsuccessfully, to rescue his father from the burning car, was having difficulty coping with the family's loss.

Chief Assistant Prosecutor James McClain stated to the court that, "An appropriately harsh sentence" would serve to deter those people who drink alcohol and then face the decision of whether or not to get behind the wheel.

Ruggerio was so addicted to alcohol that when he did not have access to alcoholic beverages he would drink mouthwash and even hand-sanitizer. He also struggled with depression and anxiety and took medications. Co-workers spoke on his behalf today. The defendant's mother wrote a letter to the Judge in which she said her son has struggled with addiction for quite some time and that she did everything in her power to dispose of all alcohol in the house, McClain stated.

Judge Garofolo also made a few remarks before imposing sentence. He expressed his condolences to the Cruz family and also noted the defendant's behavior and addiction. The Judge stated that unlike many other defendants in vehicular homicide cases who are addicted to alcohol, Ruggerio had the capacity to appreciate the nature and quality of his actions on the date of the crash. Judge Garofolo noted that, on the date of the crash, Ruggerio went so far as to "enhance his high" by taking his prescription medications and consuming hand sanitizer before causing the crash. The Judge also stressed the need to deter other defendants from such actions. The Judge also took into account the fact that Ruggerio had been convicted in May of 2008 of Driving While Intoxicated, McClain said.

Ruggerio also addressed the court and the Cruz family, stating "I don't expect forgiveness because I can't forgive myself."

**Anyone with information involving serious crimes is asked to call the Atlantic County Prosecutor's Office at 609-909-7800 or go to the Prosecutor's Office Web site at <http://www.acpo.org/tips.html> and provide information by filling out the form anonymously on the Submit a Tip page. People can also call Crime Stoppers at 609-652-1234 or 1-800-658-8477 (TIPS) or visit the Crime Stoppers Website at <http://www.crimestoppersatlantic.com/>. Crime Stoppers offers cash rewards for information leading to the arrest and indictment of those who commit crimes in Atlantic County.**