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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**Date:** June 26, 2026

**Re:** State v. John Anthony Gaeta

On June 26, 2026, John Anthony Gaeta was convicted by the Honorable Judge Alex Allman of Criminally Negligent Manslaughter following a bench trial in the Circuit Court for Harford County.

Evidence at trial proved that on September 18, 2025, 17-year-old Zachary Griffin was lawfully stopped on northbound Route 543 to turn left onto Crescent Knoll Drive. Mr. Griffin's passenger was 16-year-old Blake Elliott. The Defendant was driving northbound on 543 and failed to avoid colliding with Mr. Griffin's vehicle, pushing it into the Route 543 southbound lane where it was then struck by a school bus. Both Mr. Griffin and Ms. Elliott were trapped inside the vehicle. Mr. Griffin was extricated first and transported by the Maryland State Police's Aviation Command unit to Shock Trauma. Mr. Griffin spent 11 days in Shock Trauma with serious injuries. Ms. Elliott was extricated later and taken by ambulance to the University of Maryland Upper Chesapeake Health where she was pronounced deceased shortly after arrival.

The Harford County Sheriff's Office's Crash Team immediately began an investigation as to the cause of collision. From the on scene investigation, it was determined that there was no pre-impact braking by the Defendant's vehicle. Search warrants were obtained for the Defendant's vehicle's airbag control module and cellular phone. Data from the Defendant's vehicle confirmed that in the 5 seconds before collision, he did not use his brakes or steer his vehicle to avoid the collision. Time distance calculations showed that the Defendant drove 371 feet during those 5 seconds and only decreased from 53mph to 47mph during that time. Data logs from his cell phone proved that the Defendant immediately began using his phone after leaving work that afternoon at the Arena Club, using three applications – Her A.I., Instagram, and Chess.com – for the entire drive until 38 seconds before collision when the last app closed. Additionally, his phone was determined to be unlocked and with the screen illuminated at the time of collision.

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Sentencing has been set for August 17, 2026, where the Defendant faces a maximum penalty of three (3) years of incarceration and/or a \$5,000 fine. Following the conviction, State's Attorney Alison M. Healey made the following comment:

“Nothing can ever bring Blake Elliott back to her family, friends, or our community. The injuries that she and Zachary Griffin sustained as a result of this Defendant's choices on September 18, 2025 were shocking and horrific. The Defendant's criminal conduct took Blake's life and forever changed Zach's life, so we are proud that some justice was received for them today, despite the challenges that this case presented.

These cases can be extremely challenging to prosecute, and the current laws simply do not provide sufficient sanctions and are frankly not enough. In addition, the standards are entirely too lenient for what defines a felony versus a misdemeanor. It is my hope that at some point in the future, Blake's story will assist in changing our laws for the better to hold offenders more accountable when a life is taken in this way.

Lastly, I am incredibly grateful to all of our community members and first responders who responded to this collision with such professionalism and were able to save one life, including, but not limited to, Harford County Emergency Medical Services, Maryland State Police Aviation and Trooper One, Harford County Sheriff's Office, Bel Air Police Department, and the Bel Air Volunteer Fire Company. Special thanks should be given to Senior Officers Graziano and Rhodes and Officer Sperl of the Bel Air Police Department, Senior Deputies Berger, McGann, and Pilachowski, and Digital Forensic Examiners Heather Marsh and Megan Waltmyer from the Harford County Sheriff's Office for their investigation leading to conviction. Additionally, I thank Captain Lechasseur and Paramedic Standish from Harford County Emergency Medical Services for their helpful testimony at trial regarding the emergency treatment provided to both Blake and Zach at the time of the collision.

I want to commend Deputy State's Attorney David Ryden and Senior Assistant State's Attorney H. Scott Lewis for their tremendous efforts and advocacy in this case.

Distracted driving, especially with the continuing evolution of technology in our society, is incredibly dangerous. When the evidence of an investigation of a collision demonstrates the significant amount of negligence and distraction in which this Defendant engaged and a life is taken, those offenders will be held accountable in Harford County because that is a choice to put our community at risk, and it will not be tolerated.”