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Railroad accident victim's girlfriend wants investigation

by Dave Kurtz

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AUBURN — A Canadian man who died in a railroad accident in Auburn Sept. 4 was not supposed to be working in the United States, his girlfriend contends.

Blair F. Hammond, 54, of Cole Harbour, Nova Scotia, Canada, was killed when he was struck by a train on the CSX railroad tracks near Auburn Drive.

Hammond was working for a company that inspects rails for internal flaws that can cause derailments, said Cheryl Harlow, 51, his companion.

Harlow said Hammond had worked for his U.S.-based employer since January of this year. He was training in the United States on a permit that expired Aug. 18, she said.

“He didn’t want to be there, because he knew he legally wasn’t supposed to work there,” Harlow said Friday.

His employer told Harlow that Hammond’s death was the first involving one of its workers in the company’s 89-year history, she said.

Late on the morning of Sept. 4, Hammond was taking a rail inspection machine from the back of the truck he used in his work. He and his co-worker had stopped the truck next to a stationary “grinder train” that was very noisy, she said.

The stationary train may have blocked Hammond’s view of an approaching freight train and prevented

him from hearing it, she said.

“For whatever reason, he didn’t see the approaching train coming. He didn’t hear it,” she said.

Auburn Police described to Harlow a video of the accident, from a camera on the train that struck Hammond.

“It just shows Blair looking down. He never looked up. He didn’t know what hit him,” she said.

Hammond’s co-worker, a retired paramedic and firefighter, could not do anything about Hammond’s instantly fatal injuries, Harlow said.

“Blair was very driven. He always had to do his best work. ... His job made him feel good about himself,” Harlow said. Hammond was trained as an electrical engineer. She described him as a “very smart man, very hard worker.”

However, the fact that he apparently had overstayed his permit to work in the United States “really bothered him. He’s a really honorable man,” she said.

In his leisure time, “He really liked sports like hockey and baseball. He did a lot of coaching — girls soccer,” Harlow said. Hammond had played goalie for amateur hockey teams in the past.

In his new job, however, Hammond traveled constantly and worked long hours, Harlow said.

He probably had been in DeKalb County for only a day or two before the accident, she added.

She had talked to him by phone the night before his death, and she became worried when she could not reach him Sept. 4, she said. She learned of his death more than 10 hours after the accident.

Harlow said she has contacted U.S. immigration authorities, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration and Federal Railway Administration about the fatal accident.

“I’ll keep going with this until it’s investigated,” she vowed.