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Tree that put girl in coma was 'extraordinarily diseased'

By Rosemarie Bernardo
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The 12-year-old girl who was struck on the head by a large pine tree after it crashed through her Manoa home remains in a coma at the Queen's Medical Center.

"Last night, for the first time, there was some movement of her extremities. Unfortunately, it doesn't appear to be volitional or purposeful movement," said attorney Rick Fried, who is representing Julia Engle's family.

"Basically, what her doctor is telling us is that her condition is unchanged," Fried said.

Fried held a news conference yesterday to discuss Engle's condition and details on the Norfolk Island pine tree that fell early Tuesday morning.

Engle, a seventh-grader at Punahou School, lives with her mother, Debbie, a teacher at Kawaiahao School, and 10-year-old sister Christina.

Fried said termites, sap and topping of the trees were factors that might have caused the 70- to 75-foot pine to fall.

"The tree was extraordinarily diseased," he said.

Fried hired tree expert Gregory Severino, who inspected parts of the tree Wednesday.

There was evidence of termite tunneling and infestation up to 30 feet from the ground, Fried said. About 25 to 28 inches of the tree's diameter, which measures at 36 inches, was eaten by termites. The tree, he said, was being held to the ground by three to four inches of material.



so said there was a lot of sap on the tree up to 21 feet from the ground, "indicating that this was a terribly diseased tree."

Moreover, the tree was topped off twice at about 30 to 40 feet from the ground, causing it to decay downward from the point of topping, he said.

"It caused six branches to form, which acts as a sail. In addition, to the almost absent trunk structure, we have the sail effect of these additional branches coming out from this diseased tree so that even a moderate wind could cause the problem that occurred," he said.

Fried said some residents on Beckwith Street had raised concerns with the city about the pine trees.

Jacques Moulin, a 30-year resident, said a large tree branch from a pine in his front yard fell on his car in January 2004, breaking through the windshield.

Moulin filed a claim with the Corporation Counsel's Office. The city paid \$965.75 for damage to the vehicle.

Les Chang, acting director of the city Parks and Recreation Department, earlier said city arborists checked other pine trees on Beckwith Street and that there were no immediate concerns. The city will hire a consultant to inspect the fallen tree and the remaining pines along the street.

The Parks and Recreation Department hired contractor Nilasoni Landscape Inc. to maintain the pine trees at Beckwith Street. The tree was last pruned last November. Officials at Nilasoni Landscape would not comment. According to Fried, the company also does work for state and federal government.

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