

Drunken driving: Pushing the limits - Reise: 'Somehow I feel that I will never be forgiven'

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WARWICK - Stephen M. Reise admitted to driving drunk when he caused a crash that killed a woman and a 13-year-old girl last October and pleaded no contest to five charges related to the accident yesterday during an emotional court hearing.

Kent County Superior Court Judge Mark A. Pfeiffer sentenced Reise, 39, to 14 years in prison and 15 years' probation. It is the second-longest sentence ever handed out in Rhode Island under a plea-bargain agreement involving charges of driving under the influence, with death resulting, said Jim Martin, spokesman for Atty. Gen. Sheldon Whitehouse.

However, members of the victims' families, who addressed the courtroom before the sentence was imposed, said they didn't think it was enough.

The case has become a rallying cry for proponents of stiffer penalties for those convicted of driving under the influence. The parents of the 13-year-old victim, Kaitlyn DeCubellis, have testified at the State House in favor of a bill that would lower the legal blood-alcohol concentration for drivers to .08 from .10.

The courtroom was packed with friends and family of Kaitlyn DeCubellis, of Narragansett, and Marsha Bowman, 44, of Narragansett. At one point in the hearing, when prosecutor Stephen Ryan described details of the accident, sobs from the audience nearly drowned out what was being said.

Poster-sized photos of both victims were set up on easels in front of the courtroom. As Kaitlyn DeCubellis's father, John DeCubellis, addressed the court, he grabbed a picture of his daughter that showed her on a swing and he leaned it against a table directly in front of Reise.

He read poems that she wrote before she died, including one that says, "I wonder how old I will live to be."

"The truth is that Katie and Marsha did not die in an accident," John DeCubellis said. "They were murdered by Stephen Reise."

The charges that Reise, of 25 Seaview Ave., Jamestown, pleaded to were two counts of driving under the influence with death resulting, and three counts of driving under the influence resulting in serious bodily injury.

He was given 14 years each for the first two counts, to be served concurrently. The other three counts each carry a sentence of five years, suspended with probation, and will be served consecutively. Reise also must undergo alcohol-abuse counseling and will have his license suspended for five years when he is released.

Five other counts were dismissed as part of the plea agreement.

The longest sentence handed out in Rhode Island under a DUI death-resulting plea agreement was 15 years to Richard W. Hassett, of Johnston, who killed a 67-year-old man in Glocester in 1996.

The Reise accident happened on Route 4 in East Greenwich on Oct. 29. Bowman, her 14-year-old daughter, Rebecca, and Kaitlyn were driving to the Warwick Mall in a Honda Accord.

Prosecutor Ryan said Reise, having imbibed beer and liquor, was driving his mother's Toyota Camry when he reached down to search for cigarettes on the floor of the car. He crashed into the back of Bowman's car.

His girlfriend had warned him to slow down just before the crash.

The impact pushed Bowman's car across the median of Route 4 into oncoming traffic. An approaching car crashed into it and split it in half. In addition to the deaths, Rebecca Bowman was seriously hurt.

Two hours after the accident, Reise had a blood-alcohol level of .13, Ryan said.

Reise, who appeared to cry several times during the hearing, read a statement after the families had addressed the court. He said he "made a very poor decision" the night of the accident and expressed regret for what happened.

"All the people out there, no matter who you are, who think that this may not happen to you, I am living proof that it can," he said.

He said he has gone to confession, "but somehow I feel that I will never be forgiven."

Robert Bowman, Marsha's husband, talked about holding "a box" filled with his wife's ashes at the funeral parlor. He mentioned a picture of her hanging in the courtroom to make his point.

In the picture, taken less than a month before her death, she weighed 105 pounds, he said. But the box he held weighed 2 pounds, he said.

The DeCubellis talked at length about their daughter's life. Meg DeCubellis, the girl's mother, said she still isn't able to move anything out of her daughter's bedroom. A basketball uniform emblazoned with "DeCubellis, number 8," still hangs in the closet, she said.

John DeCubellis, a lawyer and Narragansett's municipal judge, said he knew the details of the plea bargain, including the sentence that would be imposed, before the hearing began yesterday. But he wanted to address the court to give people a picture of what his daughter was like and to draw attention to the state's drunken-driving laws.

Though reducing the blood-alcohol limit to .08 wouldn't have made any difference in Reise's case, DeCubellis said it could serve as a deterrent to others. He said he believed a .08 blood-alcohol level is enough to impair driving.

Fighting for such causes has helped them cope with their daughter's death, he said.

"It's like you're running a marathon where if you stop, you die," he said.

John DeCubellis said he and his family could not have gotten through the last few months without help from friends. A group of Kaitlyn's schoolmates attended the hearing yesterday wearing T-shirts with a picture of the sun that Kaitlyn had drawn.

In an interview after the hearing, the DeCubellis talked about the night of the accident.

Meg DeCubellis had called over to the Bowmans' house. Rebecca Bowman's brother answered, and immediately handed the phone to a state trooper.

The trooper told her that he was coming right over, but didn't say why. Meg DeCubellis called the Wickford barracks to find out what happened.

But they wouldn't tell her either. They said, "We don't like to give bad news over the phone," she was told.

So they had to wait and wonder, expecting the worst. When a trooper arrived, John DeCubellis walked outside. The trooper told him out on the lawn about his daughter.

"I knew as soon as he walked out," Meg DeCubellis said.

DAY OF RECKONING: John and Meg DeCubellis, above, weep in court yesterday after reading a statement on behalf of their daughter, Kaitlyn. Below, Stephen M. Reise, who pleaded guilty to driving drunk when he caused the accident that killed Marsha Bowman and Kaitlyn, expresses his regret.

FACES: A poster of accident victim Kaitlyn DeCubellis, 13, above, stands at the front of the Kent County Superior Court courtroom during the sentencing of the man responsible for her death. At left, Addie Warren, of South Kingstown, whose daughter Marsha Bowman, 44, was also killed, weeps in court.

Journal photos/BOB THAYER

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