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A SECOND CHANCE Conviction in teen's death reduced for young athlete

By Gerry Gittelsons
Staff Writer

LANCASTER - Former high school star Rodney Woods, whose promising athletic career appeared all but over after his felony assault conviction for his role in the death of a teenager, won a second chance Friday when a judge reduced the case to a misdemeanor.

After an emotional hearing in a packed courtroom, Superior Court Judge Thomas A. White rejected the pleas of the victims' parents and cleared the way for Woods, 20, to accept a football scholarship to Oregon University, which bans admission to convicted felons.

"I'm just so happy and so grateful. I thank God," Woods said. "I just prayed and put everything into God's hands. I think I deserve a second chance."

Woods served less than a year in jail on the assault charge for his role in a late-night fracas at a May 2000 party that led to the death of 18-year-old Christopher O'Leary of Palmdale.

Woods and two Littlerock High School teammates were originally charged with second degree murder. As part of a plea bargain, Woods pleaded no contest to assaulting another youth, Kevin Walker, 18. Fellow defendants Marcus Raines and Richard Newton were eventually sentenced to four years in prison for manslaughter.

O'Leary's parents and supporters were in court to oppose Woods' felony reduction. Many, including O'Leary's father, Michael, angrily left the courtroom as White announced his decision.

Oregon was among several universities offering Woods a scholarship - but only if the felony were reduced to a misdemeanor.

During the hearing, Michael O'Leary and Christopher's mother, Kathleen Harris, implored the judge not to lighten the punishment.

"I'm repulsed. Rodney Woods agreed to this sentence a long time ago based on the totality of that evening," O'Leary said.

"We're here, having to re-live the total incident again. I have no doubt Rodney has cleaned up his act and is a better person, but I don't want to listen to what he's about now. He should be punished for what he did then. What is this going to teach our children?"

Harris, who brought to court a wooden box containing her son's ashes, was tearful and shaky as she addressed the court.

"Every day I wake up and wish this was all a dream but I know that day will never come." Supporters openly cried as Harris stood before the judge.

"The pain is so intense, and this just adds to the emptiness," she continued.

"I promised when Chris died that I'd do everything in my power to see that justice is done. Rodney Woods made wrong choices, and we should not allow a convicted felon to pursue his football dreams. He cost my son his life. He made a bad decision and must suffer the consequences."

Defense attorney James E. Blatt implored the judge not to hold Woods accountable for O'Leary's death but instead to focus on the fact that Woods has followed all the terms and conditions of his probation, and that Woods has a golden opportunity to better himself through college.

"This is not about playing football. It's about an opportunity," Blatt said.

"Rodney Woods and his family have worked very hard for this opportunity. We realize the sensitivity of the case and the attention it has drawn ... but Rodney Woods is not trying to shirk his responsibility. He served his time and has complied with all the conditions and terms of his probation. His probation reports are as good as a report can get. He's not a danger."

Woods played junior college football in Fresno the past two seasons, twice earning JC All America honors as a defensive back.

In a brief statement to the judge Woods said he was willing to accept any decision, and that he'll continue "to strive to be the best he can be in life."

Afterward, Woods said he eventually wants to become a social worker.

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Decision changes lives again

By Steve Dilbeck

LANCASTER - You want there to be some divine judgment, a final resolution to make all the broken pieces whole again. Solomon wisdom in a small, crammed desert courthouse.

Two different sides, with so much suffering. Two different families, brought together by one horrific moment,

There's only so much a judge can do, of course. He can carefully weigh both views, absorb as much information as possible, and then attempt to make the most just decision.

He can't ease the suffering He can't hope to make it all right. Maybe in his most private moments, he can't even be certain of his own verdict.

A young man, Christopher O'Leary, is dead. A bright, thoughtful, curious young man who dreamed of going to the rain forests to study frogs.

Another talented young man, Rodney Woods, served time for his involvement in the attack that dark night in May 2000, almost three years ago. Got out and became a two-time JC All-American defensive back at Fresno City College. Has a scholarship offer from the University of Oregon. An opportunity to become the first member of his family to earn a college degree.

If only his felony assault was reduced to a misdemeanor.

The O'Leary family found the concept appalling. Saw Woods and his family trying to work the system so he could play football.

The Woods family saw a young man who made a terrible mistake, who did hit O'Leary but was convicted for punching his friend, Kevin Walker. Who had been on good behavior since and deserved a second chance.

"He already has a second chance," Kathleen Harris, O'Leary's mother, said before Friday's hearing. "He's going to college. He has a son. I'll never see my son again."

"He made his plea bargain. Now he wants to change the rules for Rodney Woods."

The O'Leary family looked at Judge Thomas White with eyes still pained with grief, trying to move past the emotion to offer reason.

"What's this going to tell our young adults?" Christopher's father, Michael O'Leary, asked White. "You can be convicted of a felony and have it reduced to a misdemeanor so you can go play football?"

And that was White's moral dilemma. Woods was no boy that night, but 17 years old. Old enough to understand the responsibility for his actions. To know right from wrong. To recognize there is a price to pay for doing wrong.

Let him off easy now, and how does that deter the next high school athlete at a party, feeling a little too full of himself or beer or bravado?

Woods confronted O'Leary when O'Leary arrived at that Littlerock High party to pick up his girlfriend. Woods left, but another football player, quarterback Richard Newton, appeared and punched O'Leary in the jaw. O'Leary collapsed and hit his head on the sidewalk. Another football player, linebacker Marcus Raines, kicked O'Leary in the head. A friend held Woods back.

Walker tried to intervene but was forced to flee by a growing mob and punched by Woods, suffering cuts and bruises. O'Leary was rushed to the hospital the next morning and died two days later from head trauma.

The morning after the attack, Woods won the long jump and triple jump at the Southern Section Division I track and field championships. Raines won both hurdle events.

Newton and Raines pleaded guilty to voluntary manslaughter and were sentenced to four years. Woods accepted a plea bargain, one year of jail time and five years probation, for felony assault on Walker.

Now a probation officer said Woods had done everything asked and recommended the felony be reduced to a misdemeanor. Oregon coach Mike Bellotti and defensive coordinator Nick Aliotti, whose self-interest in Woods is obvious, wrote letters to White urging him to give the defensive back a second chance. A court-appointed psychologist found Woods not to be a threat, and according to his attorney, Jim Blatt, called the incident "isolated and situational."

So you knew where this was headed, particularly when Blatt said if it was reduced to a misdemeanor, Woods would agree to waive his time previously served and serve up to another year (the maximum for a misdemeanor) should he violate his probation.

The district attorney appeared almost a cliché - overworked, overmatched and under-prepared.

Blatt maintained this wasn't about football but giving Woods an opportunity to obtain a college degree, to become a better citizen. Without football, of course, there would have been no request to reduce the conviction.

White allowed the parents to speak before making his ruling, and the heavy emotion grew only thicker.

Woods' mother, Delorse Woods, the director of a day-care center, said she prayed for Christopher O'Leary's family every night. That her son never did strike O'Leary. That it was a young and immature act when he hit Walker, which he had learned a life lesson and now deserved a second chance.

Woods, who had not spoken during his trial, told the O'Leary family he was sorry, accepted responsibility for hitting Walker, and said whatever the decision, he would try to make the most of his life.

Michael O'Leary said he did not doubt Woods was turning his life around, but that his current punishment was for the person he was that night three years ago, for the crime he committed then.

"We're here so Rodney Woods can go play football," he said. "I can't tell you how that detests me."

Harris, who had tried to leave O'Leary's ashes on the podium before she was asked to remove them, said she held Woods just as responsible for her son's death as the other two players. Eyes throughout the room welled as she tried to convey her pain.

White took it all in but seemed honor bound by the system. He recognized the concern for giving current high school athletes the wrong message by reducing the conviction but wondered what was the message to others under probation, doing all the right things, trying to turn things around. If he ignored all that Woods had done the past two years?

So he granted the request. Accepted Blatt's offer. Assigned Woods to 26 weeks of anger-management classes.

Michael O'Leary and most of his family stormed out of the courtroom as White spoke.

White warned Woods to take advantage of this opportunity and hoped that, by observing the O'Leary family suffering Friday, he understood that from "a moment's misjudgment, can come a lifetime of grief."

For Woods, it was a new beginning. For the O'Leary family, one more day when nothing would feel whole.