

Warrior Interrupted: Tribal Member Brad Leno Reflects On Tragedy

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Leno stumbled back to find Castellon. "I peeled back a piece of the car (that was covering him) and he looked fine. When I found him, he still had his seat belt on," said Leno.

Leno said he ran to get help. A neighbor driving by stopped. "I told her to call 911," said Leno. She looked at Castellon and said right away that he was dead.

Leno didn't believe it. Brad has since dreamed different endings to that night. His brother and sisters have had their dreams, too. Two weeks before the accident, Brad's younger sister, Brandy, had the only dream she would have about the accident.

"I was riding in the car he wrecked," she said. "All I see is the dash lights and the road ahead. Then I see the car flip and roll like I wasn't there, just watching (from beyond the scene)."

Leno's younger brother, Brett, who answered the call from the McMinnville hospital, said, "I see Rue's ok (in the dream)," said Brett. "Matt's still alive but they couldn't even find Brad."

Leno's parents are as sad about this as they can be. Two years have not altered the size of this sadness.

"I could give you the minutes and hours, too, (of the time he has been incarcerated)," said Lonnie Leno, Brad's dad.

"I miss him," said Tammy Leno, Brad's mother, though she sees him at MacLaren every week. Tears still come to her eyes when she talks about it. His father's voice cracks and he has to stop in the middle of talking from time to time.

"It doesn't seem like two years," said Brandy. Leno pled guilty to Manslaughter II. It is a Measure 11 crime based in part on the Grand Jury testimony of Rue Baller, the accident's other survivor, testimony which is not publicly available.

"The real problem in our negotiations," wrote Leno's attorney, Kristen Winemiller of Portland in an email response to questions, "was Measure 11—that despite all of the evidence we gave the prosecutor of Brad's good character (not just a lack of criminal history but positive contributions to the community), Measure 11 would have prohibited a judge from taking that into consideration at sentencing, had Brad been convicted. Certainly, Rue's prospective testimony made a conviction for a Measure 11 offense appear to be the likely result of going to trial and put Brad at risk of being convicted of an even more serious Measure 11 offense: Manslaughter I with its mandatory 120 month sentence, rather than Manslaughter II, with its mandatory 75 month sentence."

"Would the state have considered a lesser sentence without that testimony?" asked D.A. Berry, "I'm not going to speculate on that."

The difference has driven a wedge between the Leno and Baller families. After being neighbors for all those years," said Rita Baller, Rue's mother, "We lost more than the one kid," she said.

"This accident really took a toll on Rue," she said. And through his mother, Rue declined to talk about the accident. "He wishes Brad well and really thinks that Brad can make a difference but he can't talk to anybody," said Rita Baller.

Leno was sentenced to 75 months without the chance of parole.

The possibility remains, like a sword over his head, that he still will be sent to one of Oregon's adult facilities to finish his sentence. MacLaren will keep him as long as he behaves, according to Thompson.

To have every possible chance of staying at MacLaren for the duration of his sentence, Leno has been succeeding in program after program. In his first three months at the MacLaren, he earned the

"high tag" rating, which allows him full privileges, as far as that goes, but in short, it means he is doing everything asked of him.

He has successfully completed the drug and alcohol program in Grover Cottage and moved on to Hall Cottage, which mainly houses older boys and enables them to continue "taking ownership, making amends and giving back to the community," according to a source at the facility. He has been an active participant in the "Pooch Program," in which the boys take care of and train abused dogs as a way to make them

continues to care about his well-being.

As a result, early on, the families kicked around a plan not only to have Brad speak to schoolmates and others, but to have Marilyn Porter go, too. And Lonnie Leno has all along been ready to join them and provide his unique perspective.

"The courts had their own idea," said Marilyn Porter. "They couldn't let (Brad Leno) out this quickly considering the seriousness of his crime...I raged about that. Brad said he would go chained hand and foot in prison garb, it didn't matter. He wanted to go out bad, as bad as I wanted to go out (and tell this story)."

Interestingly, MacLaren superintendent Lawhead, said that though this kind of effort "never happens" at the facility, he has no record of a formal request being made. "I would entertain that discussion. It's certainly a thought that is outside the box, but maybe it's worth a shot for the benefit of other youth in the community."

"It matters now that my son's death serves a purpose," said Porter from her living room on quiet street of manufactured homes in West Salem.

"I lost the love of my life," she said. At the same time, she said, "It's not in me to be bitter or to be angry. It's just not there."

The accident changed her, though. "No, this is not how I was before (the accident). If someone asked me, (I'd tell them) I'd go out and find him and kill him to make sure he'd never do it to anyone else, but I gave it to God. From then on it was God working."

"I would hope I would be as strong as her if the roles were reversed," said Lonnie Leno, Brad's father.

For Brad Leno, the process has enabled him to reconnect with his parents in ways he hasn't connected with them for years. "I talk to her more now," he said of his mom. "We go more deep. We never talked about my feelings or things before." And for his dad, Leno said, "We went back to the relationship we had when we were younger. We talk about things we want to do."

Every parent wants to know that his or her son is OK or at least not suffering more than he or she has to. "We did a lot of work getting him to believe that MacLaren is an opportunity," said Lonnie Leno.

"I told Brad, 'When you first get there, you may have to look for something that's the best part.'"

He also told his son, "Anytime they give you an opportunity, you take it."

"They told us, 'Your son's one of the best. He doesn't belong here,' he said. "At first, it lights you up and you think, 'We'll get him out of here,' but of course, with Measure 11, he has to stay."

"I really want him to walk out with me (every time I go)," said Lonnie of his son, "but knowing that I can go back in a few days really helps me to leave."

Although Castellon was not a Tribal member, "he wanted to be one so bad," said Porter. "He went to sweats. He wanted to learn to drum." When he died, his mother had him cremated. "I dropped the ashes over Spirit Mountain," she said.

A few weeks after Castellon's death, his mother finally got around to reviewing and clearing off the messages on her telephone answering machine. One was from Matthew. He told her that he was fine and that he loved her.

Leno's sister, Brianna, who had begged him not to go out that night, thinks she could have done more. "Why didn't I hide the keys?" she asked herself.

Leno's mom wished she had called him to come home. "He was already in trouble and he wasn't supposed to be out," she said.

"Perhaps the most to be learned from such a horrible event," said the district attorney, "is to realize that none of us, particularly young people, inexperienced in both driving and drinking, are immortal."

"My hope," said Marilyn Porter, "is when Brad gets out of MacLaren, Brad and I will have such a bond that we will be lifelong friends."

Brad Leno's scheduled release date is February 7, 2008. ■



Bonded — Brad Leno and Marilyn Porter, the mother of Matthew Castellon, the boy who died in the accident, at Brad's high school graduation at MacLaren. They have become good friends.

good pets again. "It takes caring and patience and empathy," said Thompson, "all qualities these boys need." Perhaps because Brad comes naturally by many of these qualities, he has taken well to the program.

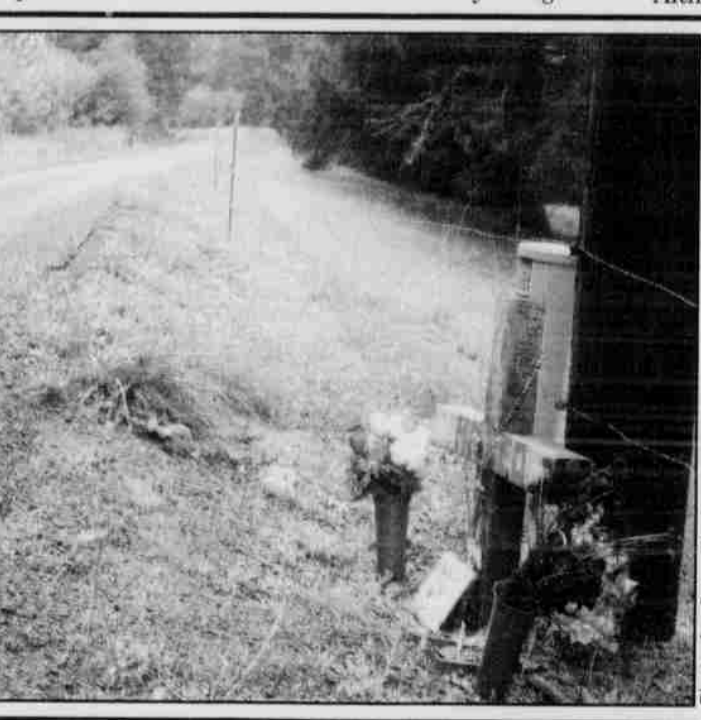
And he has been active in the Native American programs at MacLaren. He takes sweats weekly with his father and others and participates in Long House activities.

"Before I came (to MacLaren)," said Brad Leno, "I didn't have much to do with my culture."

Now, in addition to a growing cultural awareness, and maybe because of it, he is looking ahead, maybe for the first time. What he really wants to do is get out to his old high school in Willamina and to other groups of kids throughout the area and try to prevent another kid from facing Matthew Castellon's fate, and his own.

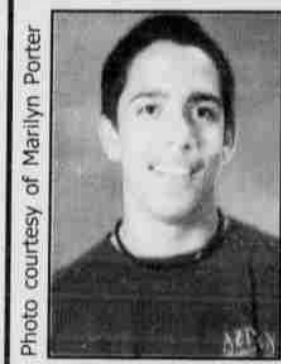
The question is, would the kids listen? "I do feel it would make a bigger impression if he went now," said Tammy Leno, his mother. "Being young and knowing the kids" would make the difference.

Leno's situation is unique in another way. As this tragedy unfolded, Brad Leno made an early effort to visit Castellon's mother, to say he was sorry, to accept blame. It could not have been an easy thing to



do right after the accident, but Leno did it. "I hurt so bad for that young man (Brad Leno)," said Tribal member Marilyn Porter. "It hurt so bad that he would have to live with this. I wanted so bad to take away the pain. I still can't imagine what he's going through."

They became fast friends and have remained friends since. Porter visits Leno at MacLaren and



Matthew Castellon

► The makeshift memorial for Castellon at the site of the fatal crash is still visited by friends affected by the tragedy.

Photo courtesy of Marilyn Porter

Photo by Peta Tinda