

'I had no premonition'

**LENO continued
from front page**

dai that night – Evan Rue Baller of Willamina and Matthew “Matteo” Castellon of Sheridan.

According to Yamhill County District Attorney Brad Berry, Leno was traveling 76 mph on Fort Hill Road at 4 a.m. when he lost control of the vehicle and hit a telephone pole. Leno and Baller walked away from the crash, but Castellon, who was sitting directly behind Leno, died.

“I remember the car,” says Berry 15 years later. “I don’t think I had ever seen a car – I’ve seen lots of cars that were smashed and crashed – but it was amazing that we had two people in the car walk away from it. I remember that from being on scene. Literally, there was only one weld holding that car together from being totally split in half. I think it’s amazing they didn’t have more deaths.”

Palomar remembers a police officer knocking on her front door at home.

“I had no premonition,” she says. “There was nothing to prepare me for the upcoming news.”

She immediately thought of her son, Matteo, and wondered if he had gotten himself in trouble while spending the night with a friend. She had no idea what she was about to hear.

“He told me that my son had been in a car accident and died,” remembers Palomar. “I remember pushing my hands out in front of me and I said, ‘God I can’t do this. You’re going to have to do this for me.’ Everything was spinning out of control. Matt was my last one home (last of her three children to live at home). He was the most like me as far as affectionate and social.”

Palomar says the officer remained with her until a friend could come over. The next morning she penned a letter to God that became the poem she read at Matteo’s funeral.

She remembers Brad’s mother, Tammy, calling her to see if Brad could come see her.

“When I opened the door to Brad’s knock, we looked at each other and then stepped into each other’s arms and held each other,” says Palomar.

Leno, the son of Tribal Elder Lonnie Leno and his wife, Tammy, remembers that he had been to Palomar’s residence with Matteo before, but he had never met her until that moment on her porch.

“I honestly expected that this woman was going to come out of her house and punch me or slap me or start cussing at me because I was the cause of her son passing away. That’s what I expected,” says Leno. “I was fully ready for that and felt that I deserved it, you know? So I go up there and she answers the door and all she wants to do is hug me.”

Leno says Palomar’s kindness was confusing.

“It was very hard,” says Leno. “At the time I’m beating myself up, tearing myself apart about this whole situation and the last person



Matthew “Matteo” Castellon

I would ever expect to have any compassion for me, sympathy for me and even care about me in the slightest, just wants to give you a hug. From that point on we kept in contact.”

Leno says Palomar asked him to stay in touch with her and to keep her aware of his court dates. He honored her request.

“In no way would I have ever wanted to bring any more hardship to her so if she didn’t want to have anything to do with me after that point I would have respected her wishes,” says Leno. “But with her saying ‘keep in contact and let me know what’s going on I want to know’ then that was the least I could do.”

Palomar says she watched Leno face the charges associated with the crash with courage. She says he proved himself by not running and hiding from responsibility, not making excuses and accepting the consequences.

“I had to know him,” says Palomar. “I had to know who he was. I wanted to know what his thoughts were. I wanted to know what this young man was about.”

On Nov. 13, 2001, Leno was convicted of second-degree manslaughter and driving under the influence of intoxicants. He was sentenced to 75 months in prison. His blood alcohol level at the time of the crash was .16 – twice the legal limit in Oregon.

“I recall that even as this case was proceeding, that she (Palomar) harbored no ill will and didn’t seem to hold anger toward him,” says Berry. “She certainly had tremendous grief over the loss of her son, but she did not harbor that kind of anger or animosity. I don’t think that happens very often. This is a very individualized response to such a tragic event.”

Palomar visited Leno at MacLaren Youth Correctional Facility and made having a relationship with her easy by the way she treated him with kindness and concern. She seemed to care for him in the way one would care for their own child, he says.

“I brought her into one of the treatment groups that I was doing,” recalls Leno. “I introduced her and told my story. After that she was able to come in as a regular visitor of mine and just visit.”

Time has brought reflection for Leno. He is now a father. He still wonders.

“Even to this day, I don’t know if I was in her shoes,” says Leno. “I don’t know if I could be that forgiving. I don’t know and I’ve been the person. I know that it was an accident. I never intended for it to happen. I was a young kid that made a stupid decision. Even today, I don’t know if I could be so forgiving.”

During Leno’s sentencing, Palomar told Judge John Collins that she had met privately with Leno and that their meeting had been healing for both of them.

Leno’s attorney, Kristen Winemiller, explained to Collins that Leno had been speaking out in the community and sharing his story with other students in an effort to make them aware of the consequences associated with drinking and driving.

“No matter what I do I can’t make up for Matteo,” says Leno. “By going out and speaking if I can reach at least one person; if one person decides to make a different decision because they listened to me, then that’s a way of making up for it.”

Winemiller, now a partner at Pacific Northwest Law, says she was not surprised to hear that Leno had served his sentence and was working for the Tribe and doing well. She also said she was not surprised to learn that the relationship between Leno and Palomar had not only continued, but thrived.

“He had tremendous potential and he had a very, very close relationship with her even as the case was progressing,” says Winemiller. “She was one of his very strongest advocates. It was a very tragic situation that he would have done anything to be able to take back. I remember him telling her at the time that he wished he could have substituted himself for her son.”

“So when I got reports back from MacLaren that he was doing well there, that he was well-liked by staff, that he was very involved in a lot of cultural activities and academic pursuits, that was exactly what I had hoped and expected to hear.”

Winemiller says she admires Palomar.

“She’s an amazing person,” says Winemiller. “Watching the way she handled herself was uplifting. As heart-wrenching as the whole situation was, it was also rewarding. Just watching that relationship that already existed between the two of them and the way they held each other up and moved each other forward was really a treasure to be able to be a part of and observe. She is an exemplary human being.”

Winemiller believes Palomar’s love and support played a role in

Leno doing so well after the accident and sentencing.

“I think it gave him a real sense of real hopefulness and obligation and brought with it some courage that I think a lot of people just don’t have,” says Winemiller. “It was incredibly insightful and really intelligent of her to recognize, even as she was going through all of that pain, how much influence she could have on Brad by talking to him that way on the front end. And it worked beautifully.”

Brad’s uncle, Tribal Council Chairman Reyn Leno, said he has made good decisions after making one really bad one.

“He went from a kid to an adult in a second,” says Reyn Leno. “He still has to live with that every day.”

Reyn Leno says he is thankful to Palomar for her kindness and compassion.

“She is remarkable to be that open-minded,” he says. “It’s an incredible situation and I think if people really knew the whole story they could learn a lot from them. She was open-minded enough to come up with the best solution and it just shows that Tribes are families.”

Palomar says getting to know Brad has been a “wonderful” experience. The two had dinner together in March.

“What an amazing young man. He has become like my son,” says Palomar. “It feels just like he is my son. I’m pleased that God has put us in each other’s lives.”

Brad says he is thankful for Palomar and the support he gets from her means a lot to him.

“This is a very unique situation, but we have been able to come together and build a relationship out of all of this,” says Brad. “Against all odds. Who would have even thought that was possible.”

Palomar says she has a message for Tribal members she hopes they will heed.

“My thought was I want every Tribal member to realize that this is pretty much the hardest thing anyone will ever have to go through – being part of the reason that someone died or being the parent of a child that is lost in this way,” says Palomar. “It’s a hard thing, but it doesn’t have to be the end; that doesn’t have to be the dead end of a life. He kept going and kept going and has done so well. He keeps reaching out to me like a son. And so I want all Tribal members to know: don’t give up. No matter what you’re struggling through right now, don’t give up.”

Palomar credits her faith for her salvation.

Leno credits his salvation and his redemption to her. ■

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