
Springfield man given 2½-year sentence in fatal crash caused by falling furniture



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SPRINGFIELD – A city man was sentenced to 30 months in jail Thursday after a jury found him guilty of leaving the scene of a fiery crash that killed a teenager in Longmeadow.

Joel Nieves Cruz, 34, of Springfield, was sentenced in **Hampden Superior Court** after a jury cleared him of manslaughter in the death of 17-year-old **Skylar Anderson-Coughlin** in 2013.

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Furniture fell from a truck driven by Nieves Cruz on **Interstate 91**, triggering a chain reaction crash that left the victim's Jeep engulfed in flames after being rear-ended by a tractor trailer.

Assistant District Attorney James M. Forsythe requested a 7- to 10-year state prison term for Nieves Cruz, citing the horrific nature of the victim's death and the defendant's criminal history before and after the accident.

Instead of trying to help the victim, Nieves Cruz drove off, leaving the burning Jeep behind, the prosecutor told Judge Richard Carey.

The accident scene was so gruesome that one of the responding firefighters is still receiving therapy and two others are plagued by memories of the crash, Forsythe said.

A state trooper responding to the crash later called it "the worst that he had ever seen," the prosecutor said.

Despite having his license suspended after the accident, Nieves Cruz was arrested four more times for driving offenses, and is currently serving a six-month sentence for his latest offense, Forsythe said.

"He has shown utter disregard" for the law, the prosecutor said, adding that a lengthy prison term would punish Nieves Cruz and serve as a deterrent to other drivers.

But defense lawyer Joseph Franco said the jury found that a design flaw in Anderson-Coughlin's Jeep was responsible for his death. A second defendant, [Rafael Perez](#), 44, of Springfield, was acquitted of manslaughter in November; he owned the truck, but was riding as a passenger on the night of the crash.

Both men ran onto the highway to retrieve furniture that tumbled from the back of the truck, disrupting traffic and causing the chain-reaction crash, police said.

Franco, who presented the defense with attorney Brandon Parrelli, asked the judge to impose a sentence of between 12 and 30 months. Sentencing guidelines for leaving the scene of a fatal accident call for a 6- to 30-month term, he said.

"This was an awful, awful case," said Franco, who expressed sympathy for the victim's family.

"My client did not cause this death," he added.

Several of Anderson-Coughlin's family members also spoke, recalling his accomplishments as a student, musician, athlete, photographer and tech enthusiast. He was twice honored as a Kid of Character by Springfield educators; on one occasion, he spoke to 2,000 people at the Basketball Hall of Fame about the importance of respect and integrity, his family told the judge.

He was scheduled to graduate from the MacDuffie School last year, and wanted to attend Stanford University and eventually work for Apple Inc., they said.

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The victim's sister, Cassandra Richardson-Coughlin, said she never expects to get over the death of her best friend and "baby brother." Shock and loss still confront her every day, she said.

"Time does not heal all wounds and can actually make them worse," she added.

In the earlier trial, the prosecution claimed that Perez and Nieves Cruz set the stage for teenager's death by loading a three-seater couch, a two-seater couch, several tables and chairs into the truck without closing the tailgate.

But defense lawyer Marissa Elkins said the accident was set into motion years before by the makers of Anderson-Coughlin's 1998 Jeep Grand Cherokee.

By 2013, Fiat Chrysler was aware that the placement of the fuel tank in Jeeps like Anderson-Coughlin's caused them to catch fire upon rear impact. Fiat Chrysler had notified the federal National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and said it would alert owners too, Elkins said.

But Anderson-Coughlin's father, the owner of the Jeep Grand Cherokee, didn't get the recall notice until well after the crash, Elkins said.

During testimony this week, the defense presented an expert witness who said Anderson-Coughlin and the defendant were both victims of the Jeep's safety defect.

Safety consultant and former Chrysler manager Paul Sheridan testified that the Jeep's fuel tank placement made it vulnerable, and presented photos of gasoline leaking from a Jeep that had been struck from behind.

Following closing arguments, jurors found Nieves Cruz guilty of leaving the scene of a fatal motor vehicle accident, but cleared him of the more serious charge of manslaughter by wanton or reckless conduct.

In an interview Thursday, Sheridan said no judge or jury has found defendants guilty in similar cases after being presented with evidence of the fuel tank defect.

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