



Posted on Thu, Mar. 11, 2010

Conway man pleads guilty in teen's death

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A Conway man was sentenced to three years' probation Wednesday after he pleaded guilty to charges that he was driving the vehicle that struck and killed his teen girlfriend during an argument with another man.

Christopher Lee Skeens, 23, was charged with murder in 19-year-old Erica Nordman's death, but he pleaded guilty to involuntary manslaughter, which carries a prison sentence of up to five years.

Circuit Court Judge Edward Cottingham sentenced Skeens as a youthful offender to six years in prison, but suspended that sentence and ordered him to serve three years on probation.

"This young man has no prior record. There is conflict of what occurred," Cottingham said.

"Purely accidental," he said, describing the incident.

The sentence was part of the negotiated plea struck between prosecutors and defense attorney Morgan Martin, Assistant Solicitor George Debusk said.

Nordman's parents agreed to the deal, he said. Nordman's mother was at the hearing, but too emotional to speak.

Her grandmother, Deborah Criner, said she was "furious he only got what he got." She asked for prison time for Skeens.

"He was in a murderous rage when he put that car in gear. He has destroyed a family," Criner said. "I think personally he was afraid of the guy he was fighting with and he tried to run over him. I don't feel him getting nothing is justice."

Nordman died April 9, 2009, after she was struck by a vehicle on Craig Street, northwest of Conway. Skeens was Nordman's live-in boyfriend, and the couple had dated for about three years before the incident.

Police said Skeens argued with Casey Dennis Ray Earl, 26, of Conway, minutes before Nordman's death. Police said Earl struck Skeens repeatedly in the face during a fight, causing Skeens to suffer a broken jaw that required surgery to repair.

Skeens was driving a Ford Explorer SUV when he hit Earl's vehicle, then backed up to try to strike Earl with the vehicle, police said.

Skeens hit Nordman and she went under the car, according to an arrest warrant. She died at the scene from massive head trauma, according to authorities.

Earl is charged with assault and battery of a high and aggravated nature and those charges are pending, according to court records.

Morgan Martin, Skeens' attorney, said Skeens stepped in to break up an argument between a woman and man when the man began to fight with Skeens.

"Nobody regrets any more what happened than he does," Martin said as Skeens, with his head, down cried during the hearing. "It's a tragic situation. He will carry with him for the rest of his life what happened here, and if you spend a little time with him, you know that."

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