

# Driver sentenced to jail time in fatal collision on U.S. 95

*Previous plea deal was rejected after objections it was too lax*

## **Scott Maben And Eli Francovich/SR**

Erin Noel Walker's life was an unfinished symphony, loved ones said after she died on a bend in the highway south of Coeur d'Alene one warm evening two summers ago. She had a deep love of music and sang with the Seattle Symphony Chorale.

The Worley teenager who took her life also has embraced song and dance. Jonathon Henry Nomee, a member of a large and well-known family from the Coeur d'Alene Tribe, has donned traditional regalia since age 4 and was honored in 2014 as Lead Man in the Julyamsh Powwow in Post Falls.

On July 25, 2013, Walker was driving south on U.S. Highway 95, about 9 miles south of Coeur d'Alene, on her way to visit her mother in Moscow. Nomee's speeding car crossed into her lane and slammed head-on into her Toyota Rav 4.

The 42-year-old woman, who grew up in Moscow and worked in international education at Shoreline Community College in Seattle, was gravely injured. She died there in the arms of a woman who had witnessed the collision.

After a lengthy investigation and prosecution, Nomee will now serve prison time for causing the fatal wreck.

On Friday, 20 months after he was first charged with misdemeanor vehicular manslaughter, Nomee pleaded guilty to felony manslaughter. Now 20, he must serve up to a year in prison, likely at the North Idaho Correctional Institution in Cottonwood, before a judge decides if he should be released on probation or remain in jail. Upon his release his driver's license will be suspended for a year.

The plea deal was reached through a mediation process between the Walker and Nomee families. Both sides agreed to the terms.

Nomee addressed the Walker family prior to his sentencing, expressing his grief and remorse.

"I think about it every day," he said. "There is not a day I don't think about this."

The case has moved slowly for Walker's parents, Richard and Diane Walker, who lost their only other child in a car accident 30 years ago. Eric Walker died at age 20 when he hit black ice on a highway near Colfax.

The Walkers spoke in court Friday, their testimony punctuated by tears. Both are grateful for the mediation process and glad that Nomee will have an opportunity for education and rehabilitation while serving his sentence.

“I sincerely hope and pray that as Jonathon Nomee matures and reflects on his past experiences that he too may become a compassionate, understanding and supportive member of our community,” Richard Walker said.

Nomee was 18 at the time of the crash and had just graduated from Lakeside High School in Plummer. He wanted to attend North Idaho College and the University of Idaho, and hoped one day to manage the Circling Raven Golf Course at the Coeur d’Alene Casino Resort Hotel, according to his graduation announcement in the tribal newsletter.

As Head Man at last year’s Julyamsh, Nomee led the traditional fancy dance with his brothers, cousins and nephews. It was an opportunity for the young man to thank family members and friends for their prayers and support.

“He’s a strong young man,” said Nomee’s father, Butch Nomee. “He’ll be able to take the lessons he’s learned and teach them to others.”

Idaho State Police investigators determined Nomee’s cruise control was set at 80 in the 60 mph zone shortly before 8 p.m. that Thursday. He claimed he had fallen asleep at the wheel of his 2007 Chrysler 300.

Nomee was injured and taken to the hospital but had never been arrested.

Police also had found aluminum foil with oxycodone residue and other drug paraphernalia in his car, but a blood test after the crash showed he had no narcotics in his system. Prosecutors agreed to drop a felony drug possession charge to a misdemeanor in the recent plea agreement.

The case has been frustrating for Sandy Brewer, a former Spokane police officer who runs a private investigation firm.

Brewer and her husband witnessed the head-on crash and swerved, narrowly missing the wreckage.

“He hit her head-on – no braking at all,” Brewer recalled. “She flew over our car.”

Brewer injured her back, shoulder and knee, but she jumped out to help and held Walker for 10 to 15 minutes as the woman succumbed to her injuries.

“She was dying but conscious,” Brewer said. “She said, ‘What happened? Why? Please help me.’ ”

She and Walker’s parents, who are divorced, have been critical of the initial Idaho State Police investigation of the crash and were alarmed by Nomee’s first plea agreement last year, which

would have kept him out of prison on a misdemeanor manslaughter conviction. First District Judge Fred Gibler was not satisfied with a sentencing restraint in that deal, and Nomee changed his plea to not guilty and hired a private attorney to replace his public defender.

The Kootenai County Prosecuting Attorney's Office amended the original charge to felony vehicular manslaughter, and all parties met recently with a mediator to hash out a new plea agreement.

Brewer said she asked to address the judge last year at the first plea hearing, and also wanted to sit in on the recent mediation. She was told she could not because she isn't related to the victim.

"The laws need to change," Brewer said. "I held her while she was dying and I saw her pain and heard her last words. The laws in Idaho need to be changed to allow people who were with the dying individual to be able to speak at these sentencings and mediations."

Walker was born in Moscow and graduated from high school there in 1989. She earned degrees in vocal performance, with an emphasis on teaching, from the University of Idaho. She performed and volunteered at the UI's Lionel Hampton Jazz Festival and was active in university jazz choirs.

Walker moved to Seattle in 2000 to work as a church music director and an elder care nursing assistant. She directed the women's chorale at the Music Center of the Northwest and traveled the globe through her love of music and international studies. At Shoreline, she counseled students from around the world and earned tenure four months before she died.

Nomee has had more driving violations since the 2013 wreck, court records show. Last Dec. 13 he was cited in Lincoln County for speeding – 18 miles over the limit. In February he was again pulled over in that county and cited for going 10 miles over the limit and having an expired vehicle registration.

"He hasn't slowed down a goddamn bit," Richard Walker said earlier this week.