



THE PLAIN DEALER

Crash changed lives of pranksters, victims

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Associated Press

Kenton, Ohio - In the flowerbed outside Jesse Howard's home is a football-shaped sign bearing the number 11.

Inside, one corner of a den is devoted to what the stepmother of the high school safety calls his "hall of fame," with trophies and photos, including one showing the boy making a touchdown in a pee wee game.

Brandy Howard chokes up when she mentions her stepson going away to juvenile detention for his role in a prank that seriously injured two teens.

On the same street, about 2½ blocks away, Mary Roby has spent nine months helping her 19-year-old son, Robert Roby Jr., recover from broken bones in his neck, arm and leg, suffered when his car hit a deer decoy placed on a country road.

He spent about three months in a neck brace and has had 10 surgeries.

For both Howard and Roby, life changed on the night of Nov. 18.

Authorities say a group of teenage boys stole a two-legged decoy deer from a yard, rigged it so it would stand, placed it in the road and watched as drivers swerved.

The decoy was at the top of a hill on the curving road, Roby said, and he didn't see it until it was right in front of his car.

"I panicked and swerved to go around it," he said, and the car turned sideways before rolling into a ditch.

Roby's seat belt gave way, his head broke the car's sun roof and he fell to the ground.

He heard his passenger and friend, Dustin Zachariah, hit the ground as well. Prosecutors say Zachariah, now 18, suffered brain damage.

"I was in so much panic, trying to get to my friend, because I could hear him breathing," said Roby, who knew the boys from school.

Investigators say Howard, 17, was among the boys who watched the cars.

He and football teammate Dailyn Campbell, 16, pleaded no contest in Juvenile Court to vehicular vandalism, possession of criminal tools and petty theft.

On Tuesday, a judge suspended 60-day juvenile detention sentences for Howard, a senior, and Campbell, a junior quarterback, until after the football season at Kenton High School.

Howard's father, C.J. Howard, said members of the community have made crude remarks to him and his family when they shop at a nearby Wal-Mart store and that his younger children are taunted by older youths when they play in the yard.

He said his son would not be the focus of such attention if he didn't play football.

"I don't know why it's about football players. Why isn't it about student council or track?" Howard asked. "He admitted what he did and he faced the consequences like a young man should."

Roby said he believes Campbell and Howard received special treatment because they're football players.

"They could have killed me and my friend so easily over a stupid prank. For me, it feels like they got a little slap on the wrist," said Roby, who graduated from Kenton High in 2005 and played baseball and golf.

"Kenton is a big football town and a lot of people don't look past that to see what really happened."

The Wildcat football team, which won state championships in its division in 2001 and 2002, draws about 4,000 fans for games in this northwest Ohio community of about 8,000 surrounded by farms.

School Superintendent Doug Roberts said the crash has drawn wide attention because of the emphasis placed on football by the news media and the community.

"I've never seen anything that has been so much an issue in the community," said Arch Rodgers, principal of the 670-student high school.

"The worst part is this has drug out so long and the longer it drug out, the more it created friction in the community."

The judge's ruling made headlines across the country, focusing attention on this town that's supported by agriculture and manufacturing and counts the Amish among its neighbors.

The community is split between people who say allowing Campbell and Howard to play shows that football players get preferential treatment and others who say they deserve another chance or will stay out of trouble if they're part of the team.

Campbell's mother, Donna Deisler, declined to comment on the case.

Messages seeking comment were left for her son's attorney, Mike Hood.

Zachariah's mother, Kathy Piper, did not return calls seeking comment.

Roby faces one more surgery on his leg and said he hopes soon to return to the University of Northwestern Ohio - where he studies high-performance automotive technology - and his job as a clerk at Kroger.

"It's been a long tunnel, but it's getting shorter," he said.

Howard and Campbell are to remain on house arrest after they are released, pay fines, perform community service and each write an essay on "Why I should think before I act."

Trials are pending for three other defendants.

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