

Seven year sentence for driver in horrific fatal Acton crash

Drunk driver 'climbed over' screaming girls to flee the scene

Red faced, teary eyed and choking up, Todd McGowan said, "I'm sorry, I truly am," before being sentenced on Monday to seven years in connection with an alcohol-fuelled, single-car crash almost two years ago in Acton that killed Jeffrey Sandles, 23, and injured four others, one who was left a quadriplegic.

Madame Justice G. Miller of the Superior Court of Justice credited McGowan, 23, for the two years he spent in jail awaiting trial, so the Mississauga man will serve five years in a federal prison. He was banned from driving for 10 years and must provide a DNA sample to the RCMP Data Bank.

The court heard that McGowan, his cousin and a friend picked up three girls at a Georgetown bar on April 3, 2010, stopped at his house to get a case

of beer and then headed through Acton to the Sandles' family home in Campbellville. McGowan, with a blood alcohol between 90 and 100-milligrams in 100-millilitres of blood, was driving Sandles' car at a high rate of speed when he lost control at the Queen and Young Streets curve and slammed into a tree.

During his jury trial, the court heard that McGowan "climbed over the girls (who were) screaming in pain" to get out of the wrecked car and fled the scene. He was arrested in Acton five hours later when he called a cab. His cousin also fled the scene and was arrested at his Mississauga home the next day.

On December 28, a jury found McGowan guilty of 14 charges including failing to stop at the scene of an accident causing death, three counts of failing to stop at an accident causing bodily harm, dangerous operation of a motor vehicle causing death, four counts of

dangerous operation of a motor vehicle causing bodily harm, impaired driving causing death, and four counts of impaired driving causing bodily harm.

McGowan sat with his eyes downcast as two of his victims detailed how their lives were changed forever by what the Justice called a "horrific, senseless accident." Rita Allimant, 22, who suffered a broken jaw, fractures of her spine and neck and leg injuries said, "I will never be the same," adding along with the physical injuries, she is emotionally scarred and has nightmares about the crash. Marcella Vanraalte told the court she still has nightmares about smoke filling up a car and is in constant pain, having injured her pelvis and hip.

Along with his own victim impact statement, Jeffrey Sandles' father, Brian, read statements for his wife and daughter who both said they will never be the same as they struggle daily to deal with the debilitating grief of losing their loved one.



PRISON FOR DRIVER: Moments after crashing this car in Acton almost two years ago, Todd McGowan, 23, of Mississauga crawled over his dead friend, Jeffrey Sandles, and four screaming passengers and fled the scene. He was sentenced to seven years in prison, minus two years credit for time spent awaiting trial, in a Milton court on Monday. — *Tanner file photo*

"Time will not heal these wounds," he said, adding they get some comfort from Sandles' son, their grandson, Noah.

In his brief statement to the court, McGowan, clean shaven with a buzz cut, called Sandles more than a friend, a "brother," and said he will also have to live forever with the pain he caused. "I'm sorry for the pain I caused...and for the loss of life of one so young and bright."

Justice Miller, who called McGowan's statement "elegant, emotional and apparently heartfelt," said no sentence can make up for the family's loss or the victims' injuries, and their scars are a constant reminder of the "horrific, senseless accident."

The court heard that McGowan, a high school drop-out, has a criminal record stretching back eight years, including what Crown John Dibski

called a "pattern of non-compliance" with court ordered supervisions, including three separate probation orders.

Outside of the Milton court, Sandles said he could forgive McGowan for the accident, but not for running away without trying to help the victims. "Nothing is going to bring our son back, but we're pleased with the sentence. Hopefully, Todd can turn his life around," he said.

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