

Inmate learns about victim at gravesite

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Right: A handcuffed David Littlesun, wearing an orange jumpsuit, looks on as Mitsuye and Neal Conover place flowers on their son's grave Thursday in Bartlesville.

Below Left: David Littlesun is reflected in the frame of a portrait of Sean Conover, who was remembered in a graveside service in Bartlesville on Thursday.

World Staff photos by Mike Simons.

BARTLESVILLE -- David Littlesun may never really get to know who Sean Conover was, but Thursday was a start.

This introduction, tragically, has to begin at the end. It leads off at a gravesite and hopefully connects back into a life that was lived all too briefly.

"I just feel all I want is for David Littlesun to know my son," said Sean's mother, Mitsuye Conover. "It's too easy for him if it's an anonymous person he's killed."

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And so, on a relentlessly windy Thursday at Memorial Park Cemetery, the impact of Sean Conover's 19 years was made crystal clear to Littlesun. The man whose drunken driving led to Conover's death was brought into the grieving process, if only for 30 minutes.

A judge's order sent Littlesun to this cemetery, but it was Mitsuye and Neal Conover, Sean's mother and father, who had to determine whether the man who killed their son is truly sorry for his actions.

“Yes, I didn't think it would come out so well,” Mitsuye Conover said afterwards. “I looked into his eyes, and he looked back into mine.”

She told Littlesun he could have been her son's friend. Littlesun nodded and said, “Yes, I think so.”

This agreeable humility was in marked contrast to a February day at the Payne County Courthouse in Stillwater, where Littlesun pleaded guilty to manslaughter, drunken driving and driving under suspension in Sean Conover's 1996 fatal automobile accident.

At that court session, Littlesun joked, chewed gum and seemed completely unrepentant, according to news reports.

On Thursday, faced down by family members, friends and a few members of the media, Littlesun paid attention quietly, nodding his head, folding his hands and standing stock-still in an orange jumpsuit with his legs chained. A deputy stood by his side.

“Always,” he replied when asked if he now felt regretful for Conover's death.

So, did David Littlesun now feel like he knew Sean Conover?

“A lot better,” he said.

David Littlesun and Sean Conover met once before, briefly and fatally on a early September morning in 1996.

Conover was a freshman at Oklahoma State University. His whole life lay before him as he and a classmate drove along Oklahoma 51 heading home to Bartlesville.

An oil gauge light went on in the friend's car, so they pulled over.

Close behind them was Littlesun, driving despite a blood-alcohol level of 0.29, nearly three times the legal limit. Littlesun crashed into the back of the car carrying the OSU students, pushing that car into the middle of the road.

Moments later, another car came along and, the driver not seeing the teenagers soon enough, hit the car, killing Conover.

Seventeen months later, Littlesun pleaded guilty to manslaughter and drunken driving.

At the Payne County Courthouse, his seeming indifference angered the Conovers and Associate District Judge Robert Murphy Jr., who himself had lost a child years earlier.

So Mitsuye Conover approached the judge at that time and asked that Littlesun each year join Sean's parents on a pilgrimage to their son's Bartlesville gravesite.

Murphy ordered that Littlesun visit the Conovers for the next seven years on June 25, Sean's birthday.

Thursday was the first such visitation. And while Littlesun got a short, somber introduction into the life that was Sean Conover's, the boy's mother thinks there is so much more to tell.

“I still want him to come back,” Mitsuye Conover said. “I want him to see a real person.”

The real Sean Conover that Littlesun will have seven years to learn about is the type of child that parents dream about, his mother said.

Spiritually anchored and level-headed, Sean loved music and animals. Doted on as an only child, he turned down the offer of a new car and spent his own money to buy a pair of sister Chihuahuas, Lisa and Jamie.

He once sent his mother a letter thanking her for letting him quit gymnastics, which he didn't enjoy but knew his mother did. “I know how much it meant to you,” he wrote.

“He once told Neal and I, ‘Mom and Dad, you need to get new friends. There's a lot of people out there hurting,’ ” Mitsuye recalled.

Since September 1996, the Conovers have been hurting with the unspeakable pain known only to parents who have lost children. In their anguish, Sean's parents mostly regret that their son's best years were still ahead of him.

“I will never get over that he was robbed of so many productive years,” Mitsuye said.

What she wanted David Littlesun to see was not what could have been for Sean Conover, but what was.

Littlesun saw the grave marker and the large photograph of the young man with dark hair and soulful eyes. He heard the poem by classmate Molly Tomutsa and remembrances read by family friend Jean Fincher. He even heard the punk ska tape of Sean's band, the Short Orders.

But did he see the whole life and what it meant to so many people? That will take time, Mitsuye Conover believes. Lots of time.

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