

State Supreme Court affirms Russell convictions for drunk-driving deaths and injuries | The Daily World

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By Barb Aue South Beach Bulletin

On Aug. 20, the state Supreme Court unanimously affirmed the convictions of Frederick D. Russell, who killed three people, one of them from Westport, and nearly killed three others in a June 4, 2001, drunk-driving crash in Eastern Washington.

According to the state Attorney General's Office, "In his appeal, Russell argued that his right to a public trial was violated when the trial judge considered certain requests from jurors for "hardship excusals" outside of the courtroom. Hardship excusals are when jurors request to be excused from service for reasons unrelated to the specific case, e.g., because of healthcare issues, lack of childcare, military service or educational responsibilities.

"The Supreme Court rejected his argument, finding that requests for hardship excusals have not traditionally been considered in open court, and that there is no good reason why they need to be."

A 22-year-old WSU student and Pullman resident at the time of the fatal crash, after drinking, Russell was speeding along the seven mile stretch of State Route 270 between Moscow, Idaho and Pullman on June 4, 2001, when he attempted to pass another vehicle in a No Passing Zone at an estimated 90-mph. His Blazer collided with that car; he lost control, collided with an oncoming car, and then hit a third vehicle.

Local victim

Westport resident, Ryan Sorensen, 21, died in the accident. He was a passenger in the third vehicle, a 1978 Cadillac driven by his roommate, Brandon S. Clements, 22, of Wapato. Clements and Sorensen's girlfriend, Stacey Morrow, 21, of Milton, both WSU students, were also killed. Seven others were injured, three of them critically. Sorensen, who graduated from WSU that June, had returned to the university to complete an additional course.

Flight & extradition

Russell's trial was originally scheduled for December of 2001. However, he fled to Ireland, and remained there under an assumed name until he was located and arrested on Oct. 23, 2005, four years to the day after fleeing the country.

Russell was convicted in Cowlitz County Superior Court in Kelso on Nov. 6, 2006 on three counts of vehicular homicide and three counts of vehicular assault. He was sentenced on Jan. 2, 2007 to 14 years and 3 months in prison.

Prison release

Russell was released from prison on April 14 of this year, after receiving days credit for more than a year served in an Irish prison following his capture, 426 days served prior to his sentencing following the trial and 405 days for good behavior while in prison.

"I am pleased that the Supreme Court upheld Russell's convictions," Attorney General Bob Ferguson said

in a press release on Aug. 20.

“His victims and their families have suffered enough, and I hope that today’s decision brings them some small measure of closure. I also want to thank the dedicated, talented attorneys in my office who prosecuted Russell and successfully defended his convictions on appeal.”