

Driver thanks victim ‘I took your life ... and you saved mine,’ she says Bicyclist’s family angered by words, sentence

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Angering the victim’s family at her sentencing, a Lake Grove woman credited the woman she killed while driving under the influence of prescription drugs for helping her to kick addiction.

Nicole Shellard, 34, was sentenced yesterday by Suffolk County Court Judge Martin Efman to 1 1/2 to 4 1/2 years in prison for hitting and killing bicyclist Kathryn Underdown, 45, also of Lake Grove - far less than the maximum of 5 to 15 years requested by prosecutors and Underdown’s family. Shellard pleaded guilty to manslaughter and other charges in November.

“Kathryn, you saved me from the hellish life of addiction I was suffering,” said a sobbing Shellard, who spent nine months in an inpatient drug rehabilitation facility after the crash. “I believe you gave me my life back. Life is worth living now, as opposed to existing, as I was slowly committing suicide. You are my angel. I took your life, Kathryn, and you saved mine.”

She promised to pay her debt to society by speaking to other addicts about the risks of addiction. Both the sentence and Shellard’s words upset the victim’s family.

“That was a joke,” said Brian Underdown of Florida, a brother of the victim. “It was totally disrespectful to my family.” Shellard’s message, he said, was “Her death is my rehab - it’s very bizarre.”

Assistant District Attorney Ray Varuolo said in court that before the crash on Route 25A in Miller Place, several people called 911 to report Shellard swerving all over the road. Police found 441 pills in 20 containers in her car, he said - a sign she must have been doctor-shopping for pills, Varuolo said. She took triple the regular dose of her medications before driving, Varuolo said.

Defense attorney Michael Brown, of Central Islip, denied that his client shopped for drugs. Her prescriptions for Xanax, an anti-anxiety drug; suboxone, a pain reliever; and soma, a muscle relaxant, were legitimate, he said. After the crash, she spent nine months in an inpatient rehabilitation facility weaning herself from these drugs, although she still must take some medication for depression and bipolar disorder. Efman said that rehabilitation stint was a major factor in the relatively light sentence.

“Your honor, how do we determine the value of a life?” asked Underdown’s husband, Michael Slovitsky. “Life isn’t always fair, but the judicial system should be.”

Brown said the sentence was appropriate for Shellard, who he said meant every word she said. “It’s not the value of a life,” Brown said of the sentence. “We know that. But it is significant for my client.”