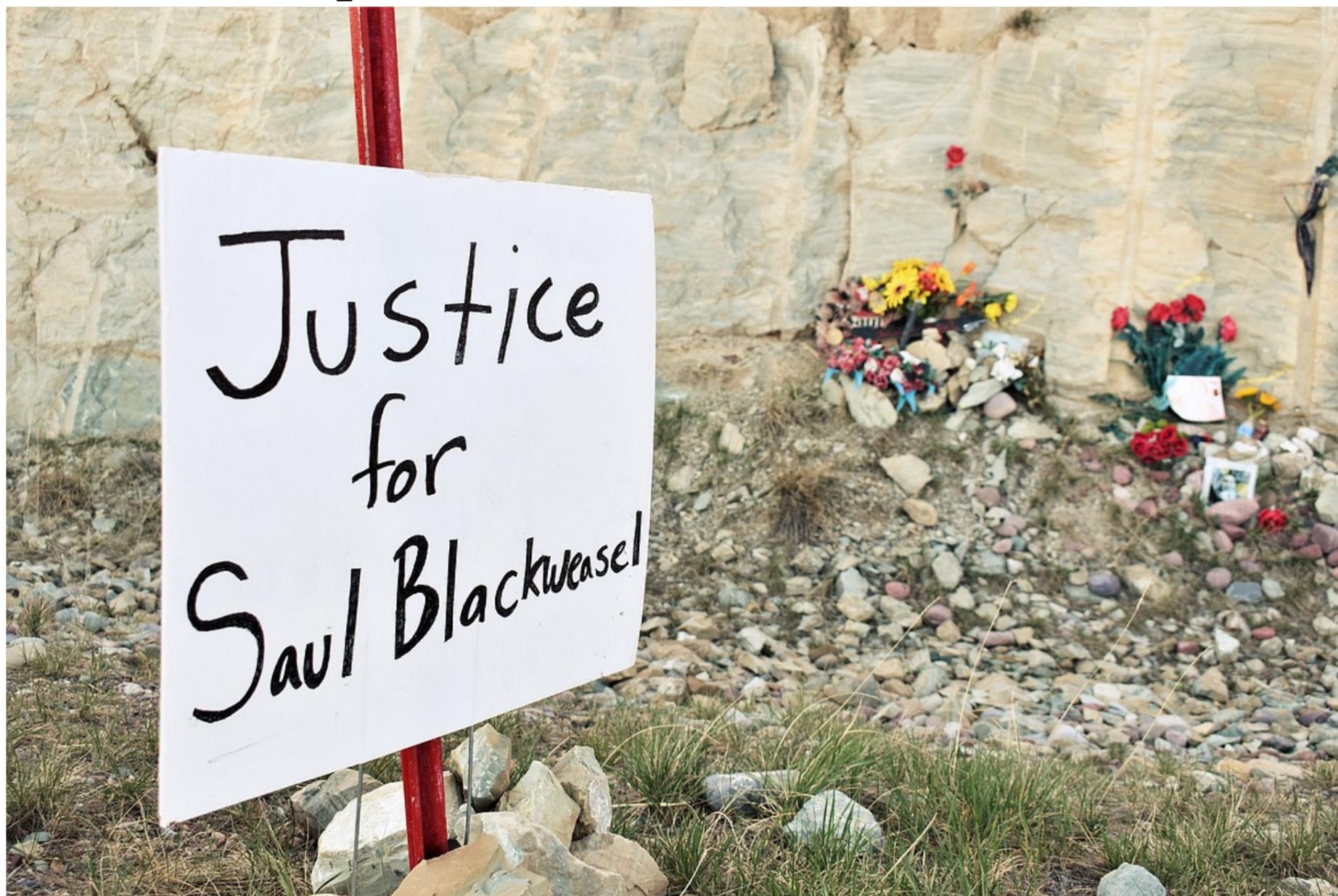


St. Ignatius man, mother plead guilty to roles in fatal crash, cover up



A memorial has been created near the site of a crash where Saul Blackweasel died in January 2021. (Emily Lonnevik/Lake County Leader)



Several dozen people participated in a march Saturday, Nov. 20 that culminated at the Lake County Courthouse in Polson. The procession was intended to raise awareness of the death of Saul Blackweasel who died in a crash in January at age 18. (Lake County Leader)

By
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Lake County Leader
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A St. Ignatius man and his mother have pleaded guilty to felonies related to their roles in a January 2021 fatal crash and attempted cover up that

sparked widespread calls for justice for the victim of the crash.

Rope Kinkade Ardis, 19, pleaded guilty to vehicular homicide while under the influence as part of a plea agreement Wednesday, April 6, in Lake County District Court.

Immediately after Ardis' plea, his mother, Roberta Virginia Asencio, pleaded guilty to tampering with witnesses or informants, also as part of a plea agreement.

Their cases stem from a one-vehicle rollover accident near mile marker 6 on Back Road, west of Pablo and south of Polson, the night of Jan. 23, 2021. Dispatchers received a report of the crash around 10:30 p.m. A Montana Highway Patrol trooper heard the call and responded to the scene to find Ardis' 2006 Ford Mustang and an ambulance crew tending to two people receiving medical assistance outside of the vehicle. One person receiving attention was Saul Blackweasel, 18, of Polson, who was seated in the front passenger seat, according to court records, and subsequently was pronounced dead at the scene.

Ardis was not present at the scene when authorities arrived, but his mother was. She told investigators that the vehicle was her son's but she didn't know where he was. Investigators discovered Ardis' wallet and ID card at the scene.

Further investigation revealed that Ardis had used his phone to call relatives shortly after the crash, but he did not report the crash to dispatchers, nor did he request medical assistance for his passengers.

Court documents indicate Asencio took her son to her sister's home. Authorities located Ardis at his aunt's house and took him to St. Luke Community Healthcare in Ronan, where he admitted to a Tribal Police officer that he had been drinking. The officer noted that Ardis was wearing only one shoe, a Nike, and a matching shoe was discovered at the scene of the crash.

Subsequent testing revealed Ardis' DNA was present on the deployed airbag of the steering wheel, indicating Ardis was driving at the time of the crash.

Asencio initially denied helping her son flee the scene and claimed no knowledge of his role in the crash.

Vehicular homicide while under the influence carries a maximum penalty of 30 years in prison and/or a \$50,000 fine. Ardis' plea agreement recommends a sentence of 20 years, with 10 years suspended. The agreement also acknowledges that a lesser charge of felony negligent homicide — which carries a maximum penalty of 20 years in prison and a \$50,000 fine — is no longer an option.

Felony tampering with witnesses and informants carries a maximum penalty of 10 years in prison and/or a \$50,000 fine. Asencio's plea agreement recommends a sentence of five years in prison, with all suspended.

Lake County Attorney Steve Eschenbacher is handling both cases for the state. Both Ardis and Asencio are being represented by Polson defense attorney Britt Cotter.

Sentencing is now in the hands of Lake County District Court Judge James Manley, who is not bound by the terms of the plea agreements and has the option to impose harsher penalties for either defendant. Manley set sentencing in both cases for May 25.

Judge Manley is set to retire the first week of June, so it's possible his successor will handle sentencing if there are any delays in the process.

The cases sparked a "Justice for Saul" movement throughout the county, with many believing Blackweasel may have survived if Ardis had called 911 immediately after the crash. A cross has been installed near the scene of the crash, along with a small memorial featuring flowers and photographs.

The movement gained momentum on social media, and there were several marches around the one-year anniversary of the crash to bring attention to the case.

Blackweasel graduated in 2020 from Ronan High School, where his activities included playing for the Chiefs basketball team.



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