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*"Inclusion Through Diversity"*

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PRESS RELEASE / FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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District Attorney Matthew Van Houten announced today that Robert J. DeFelice, 38, of Ithaca, appeared in Tompkins County Court yesterday afternoon and entered a guilty plea to the crime of Aggravated Vehicular Homicide, a Class B Felony. DeFelice pleaded guilty to the most serious count of the indictment and waived his right to appeal.

The maximum possible sentence is a term of eight and a third to twenty-five years in New York State prison.

DeFelice admitted to driving recklessly while operating a motor vehicle under the influence of cocaine and with a blood alcohol content greater than .18%, on July 21, 2021 in the Town of Ithaca. DeFelice drove his vehicle over the fog line onto the shoulder of Route 96 near Indian Creek Farm, into the path of four young girls who were walking on the shoulder, striking two of the girls and causing the death of fourteen-year-old Sophia Nickerson.

Sophia Nickerson was a student at the Lehman Alternative Community School and was a beloved daughter, grand-daughter, niece, sister and friend to many.

Van Houten said, "I would like to recognize the members of the community who stepped forward in the immediate wake of this tragedy to provide care to the victims and to ensure that the perpetrator was caught. Additionally, the professional response of both the Tompkins County Sheriff's Office and the Ithaca Police Department ensured that the defendant was brought to justice. It is meaningful that the defendant pleaded guilty to the most serious charge. While nothing can make this tragedy less painful for the victim's family, the defendant's acceptance of responsibility represents a small measure of justice."

Assistant District Attorney Daniel Johnson prosecuted the case and Jason Leifer represented the defendant.

Sentencing has been scheduled for March 3, 2022 at 2:00 p.m. before County Court Judge Joseph R. Cassidy.

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