



Manti Te'o's Dead Girlfriend, The Most Heartbreaking And Inspirational Story Of The College Football Season, Is A Hoax

Timothy Burke and Jack Dickey -
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Notre Dame's Manti Te'o, the stories said, played this season under a terrible burden. A Mormon linebacker who led his Catholic school's football program back to glory, Te'o was whipsawed between personal tragedies along the way. In the span of six hours in September, as Sports Illustrated told it, Te'o learned first of the death of his grandmother, Annette Santiago, and then of the death of his girlfriend, Lennay Kekua.

Kekua, 22 years old, had been in a serious car accident in California, and then had been diagnosed with leukemia. SI's Pete Thamel described how Te'o would phone her in her hospital room and stay on the line with her as he slept through the night. "Her relatives told him that at her lowest points, as she fought to emerge from a coma, her breathing rate would increase at the sound of his voice," Thamel wrote.

Upon receiving the news of the two deaths, Te'o went out and led the Fighting Irish to a 20-3 upset of Michigan State, racking up 12 tackles. It was heartbreaking and inspirational. Te'o would appear on ESPN's College GameDay to talk about the letters Kekua had written him during her illness. He would send a heartfelt letter to the parents of a sick child, discussing his experience with disease and grief. The South Bend Tribune wrote an article describing the young couple's fairytale meeting—she, a Stanford student; he, a Notre Dame star—after a football game outside Palo Alto.

Did you enjoy the uplifting story, the tale of a man who responded to adversity by becoming one of the top players of the game? If so, stop reading.

Manti Te'o did lose his grandmother this past fall. Annette Santiago died on Sept. 11, 2012, at the age of 72, according to Social Security Administration records in Nexis. But there is no SSA record there of the death of Lennay Marie Kekua, that day or any other. Her passing, recounted so many times in the national media, produces no obituary or funeral announcement in Nexis, and no mention in the Stanford student newspaper.

Nor is there any report of a severe auto accident involving a Lennay Kekua. Background checks turn up nothing. The Stanford registrar's office has no record that a Lennay Kekua ever enrolled. There is no record of her birth in the news. Outside of a few Twitter and Instagram accounts, there's no online evidence that Lennay Kekua ever existed.

The photographs identified as Kekua—in online tributes and on TV news reports—are pictures from the social-media accounts of a 22-year-old California woman who is not named Lennay Kekua. She is not a Stanford graduate; she has not been in a severe car accident; and she does not have leukemia. And she has never met Manti Te'o.

* * *

Here is what we know about Manti Te'o: He is an exceptional football player. He's a projected first-round NFL pick. He finished second in the Heisman voting, and he won a haul of other trophies: the Walter Camp, the Chuck Bednarik, the Butkus, the Bronko Nagurski. In each of his three seasons as a full-time starter, he racked up at least 100 tackles.

We also know that Te'o is a devout Mormon. When asked why he picked Notre Dame over Southern California, the school he had supported while growing up in Hawaii, he said [he prayed on it](#). "Faith," he told ESPN, "is believing in something that you most likely can't see, but you believe to be true. You feel in your heart, and in your soul, that it's true, but you still take that leap."

We know, further, that Te'o adores his family. Te'o's father [said](#) that Manti had revered his grandfather, who died in January 2012, since the day he was born. He ran his sister's [post-graduation luau](#). And he loved his late maternal grandmother, Annette Santiago. ([Here's her obituary](#).)

But that's where the definite ends. From here, the rest of Te'o's public story begins to grade into fantasy, in the tradition of so much of [Notre Dame's mythmaking](#) and with the help of a compliant press.

Assembling a timeline of the Kekua-Te'o relationship is difficult. As Te'o's celebrity swelled, so did the pile of inspirational stories about his triumph over loss. Each ensuing story seemed to add yet another wrinkle to the narrative, and details ran athwart one another. Here is the general shape of things, based on occasionally contradictory media accounts:

Nov. 28, 2009: Te'o and Kekua meet after Stanford's 45-38 victory over Notre Dame in Palo Alto, [according to the South Bend Tribune](#): "Their stares got pleasantly tangled, then Manti Te'o extended his hand to the stranger with a warm smile and soulful eyes." Kekua, a Stanford student, swaps phone numbers with Te'o.

2010-2011: Te'o and Kekua are friends. "She was gifted in music, multi-lingual, had dreams grounded in reality and the talent to catch up to them" (South Bend Tribune). "They started out as just friends," Te'o's father, Brian, told the Tribune in October 2012. "Every once in a while, she would travel to Hawaii, and that happened to be the time Manti was home, so he would meet with her there."



Early 2012: Te'o and Kekua become a couple. They talk on the phone nightly, according to [ESPN](#).

Some time in 2012: Kekua has a car accident somewhere in California that leaves her "on the brink of death" (Sports Illustrated). But when?

Eight months before she died of cancer, in September, reports [ESPN](#). "About the time Kekua and Manti became a couple," reports the South Bend Tribune. April 28, reports SI.

June 2012: As Kekua recovers from her injuries, doctors discover she has leukemia. She has a bone-marrow transplant. ("That was just in June," Brian Te'o told the South Bend Tribune in October of 2012. "I remember Manti telling me later she was going to have a bone marrow transplant and, sure enough, that's exactly what happened. From all I knew, she was doing really, really well.")

Summer 2012: Her condition improves. Kekua "eventually" graduates from Stanford, according to the South Bend Tribune. (A New York Times story, published Oct. 13, identifies her as a "Stanford alumnus.") She soon takes a turn for the worse. At some point, she enters treatment, apparently at St. Jude Medical Center in Fullerton, Calif. (In [a letter obtained by Fox Sports published Oct. 25](#), Te'o writes to the parents of a girl dying of cancer: "My girlfriend, when she was at St. Jude's in LA, she had a little friend.")

Te'o talks to Lennay nightly, "going to sleep while on the phone with her," according to Sports Illustrated. "When he woke up in the morning his phone would show an eight-hour call, and he would hear Lennay breathing on the other end of the line."

Sept. 10, 2012: Kekua is released from the hospital; Manti's father, Brian, congratulates her "via telephone" (South Bend Tribune).

Sept. 11-12, 2012: Te'o's grandmother dies in Hawaii. Later, Kekua dies in California. Or is it the other way around? "Te'o's girlfriend, Lennay Kekua, died Sept. 11 of complications from leukemia. His grandma, Annette Santiago, died after a long illness less than 24 hours later," according to the Sept. 22 South Bend Tribune. No, Annette dies first, according to the Oct. 12 South Bend Tribune. In fact, Lennay lives long enough to express condolences over the death of Annette:

Less than 48 hours later [after Lennay's release from the hospital], at 4 a.m. Hawaii time, Kekua sent a text to Brian and Otilia, expressing her condolences over the passing of Otilia's mom, Annette Santiago, just hours before.

Brian awakened three hours later, saw the text, and sent one back. There was no response. A couple of hours later, Manti called his parents, his heart in pieces.

Lennay Kekua had died.

Or does Kekua die three days later ([New York Post](#))? Four days ([ESPN](#), [CBS](#))?

In any case, according to Te'o's interview with Gene Wojciechowski in a segment aired during the Oct. 6 episode of College GameDay, Lennay's last words to Te'o were "I love you."

Sept. 12, 2012 (morning): Te'o is informed of his grandmother's passing (Sports Illustrated).

Sept. 12, 2012 (afternoon): Te'o is informed of Kekua's passing by her older brother, Koa (Sports Illustrated).

Sept. 15, 2012: Te'o records 12 tackles in leading the Irish to an upset win over Michigan State.

Sept. 22, 2012: Kekua's funeral takes place in Carson, Calif. (The Associated Press puts it in "Carson City, Calif.," which does not exist.) Te'o skips the funeral, [saying Kekua had insisted that he not miss a game](#) (Los Angeles Times). Her casket is closed at 9 a.m. Pacific time, [according to Te'o](#). That night, Notre Dame beats Michigan, 13-6, to go to 4-0, the school's best start in a decade. Te'o intercepts two passes. After the game, he says of Lennay: "All she wanted was some white roses. So I sent her roses and sent her two picks along with that."

Notre Dame head coach Brian Kelly awards the game ball to Lennay Kekua, handing it to Te'o to "take back to Hawaii."

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It was around this time that Te'o's Heisman campaign began in earnest, [aided in part](#) by the South Bend Tribune. He appeared on the cover of Sports Illustrated's Oct. 1 issue, above the headline, "The Full Manti."

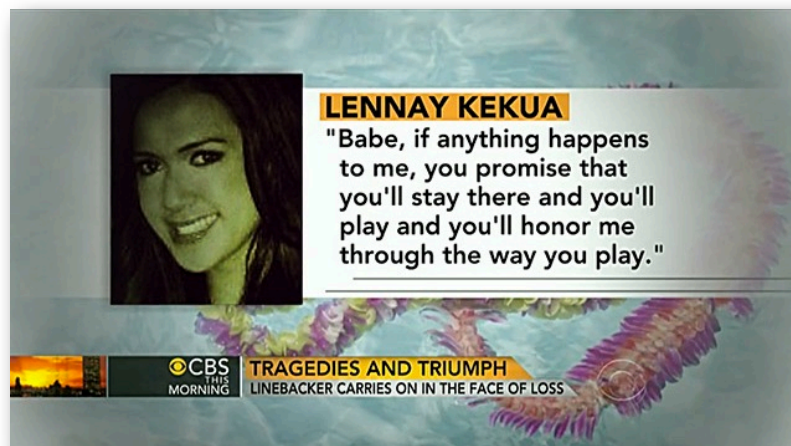
And it was around this time that Manti and his father began filling in details about the linebacker's relationship with Lennay. Brian Te'o told multiple reporters that the family had never met Kekua; the Te'os were supposed to spend time with her when they visited South Bend, Ind., for Notre Dame's Senior Day on Nov. 17. The elder Te'o told the South Bend Tribune in October, "[W]e came to the realization that she could be our daughter-in-law. Sadly, it won't happen now."

Lennay Kekua's death resonated across the college football landscape—especially at Notre Dame, where the community immediately embraced her as a fallen sister. Charity funds were started, and donations poured into foundations dedicated to leukemia research. [More than \\$3,000 has been pledged](#) in one IndieGogo campaign raising money for the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society.

Te'o's story moved beyond the world of sports. On the day of the BCS championship game between Notre Dame and Alabama, CBS This Morning ran a three-minute story that featured a direct quote from Lennay Kekua:

Babe, if anything happens to me, you promise that you'll stay there and you'll play and you'll honor me through the way you play.

CBS also displayed this photo of Kekua several times throughout the piece:



This week, we got in touch with a woman living in Torrance, Calif. We'll call her Reba, to protect her identity. She was initially confused, then horrified to find that she had become the face of a dead woman. "That picture," she told us over the phone, "is a picture of me from my Facebook account."

* * *

Manti Te'o and Lennay Kekua did not meet at Stanford in 2009. The real beginning of their relationship apparently occurred on Twitter, as an encounter between @MTeo_5 and @lovalovaloveYOU, on Oct. 10, 2011. Here's the moment they first made contact.

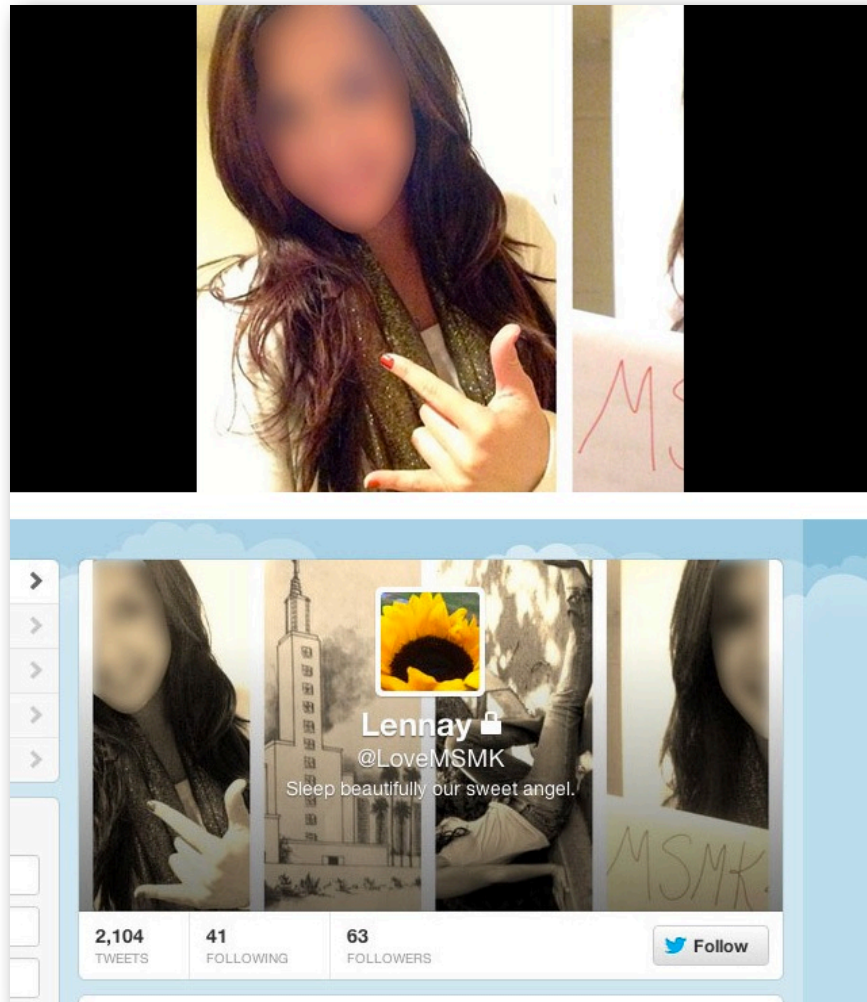
[@lovalovaloveyou](#) nice to meet u too ma'am

— Manti Te'o (@MTeo_5) [October 10, 2011](#)

Lennay Kekua's Twitter name was @lovalovaloveYOU from 2011 until April 2012, @LennayKay from April until September 2012, and has been @LoveMSMK ever since. Their interactions, by and large, consisted of mild flirting. By January 2012, they were a "couple," and Te'o sprinkled #LMK (for Lennay Marie Kekua) throughout his Twitter timeline in 2012.

As for what Kekua was tweeting, we have only bits and pieces. Her Twitter was private during most of this time, though various Google caches reveal her ever-changing series of avatars and a handful of Twitpics.

All of those photographs—with one important exception—came from the private Facebook and Instagram accounts of Reba, whom we found after an exhaustive related-images search of each of Lennay's images (most of which had been modified in some way to prevent reverse image searching). We sent her a number of photographs that had appeared on Lennay's Twitter account, which is now private but apparently still active (see [this retweet](#), for instance). One picture in particular brought Reba to a start. It had been used briefly as @LoveMSMK's Twitter avatar and later in the background of the page (we've blurred out the face, at Reba's request):



That photo hadn't appeared on the internet—at least, not to Reba's knowledge. She had taken it in December 2012 and sent it directly to an old high school acquaintance. The two hadn't talked since graduation, but the classmate, whom Reba remembered fondly, contacted her on Facebook with a somewhat convoluted request: His cousin had been in a serious car accident, and he had seen her photos before and thought she was pretty. Would she be so kind as to take a picture of herself holding up a sign reading "MSMK," to put in a slideshow to support the cousin's recovery? (He didn't explain what MSMK meant, and Reba still doesn't know.) Baffled but trusting, Reba made the sign and sent along the photo.

And now here it was on a dead girl's Twitter profile. After googling Lennay Kekua's name, Reba began to piece things together. She called up the classmate. He expressed alarm, Reba told us later, and "immediately began acting weird." "Don't worry about it," he told her. Moments after the phone call, Reba's picture was removed from the @LoveMSMK Twitter profile. Then, in a series of lengthy phone calls, Reba told us everything she knew about the classmate, a star high school quarterback turned religious musician named Ronaiah Tuiasosopo.

Ronaiah Tuiasosopo comes from a big football family. His father, Titus, played for USC in the late '80s and early '90s. One uncle, Navy, played for the L.A. Rams; another uncle, Mike, coaches the defensive line at Colorado. A cousin from an older generation, Manu, went to Seattle in the first round in 1979; another cousin, Marques, went to Oakland in the second round in 2001. A cousin from a different side of the family, Fred Matua, earned All-America honors at guard for USC and played on several NFL teams, before dying this past August of a heart-related issue. (He was 28.)



Ronaiah Tuiasosopo

Tuiasosopo, now 22, had once been something of a football prospect himself. In 2005, the [Los Angeles Daily News](#) wrote that the young Tuiasosopo, then the sophomore starting quarterback for Antelope Valley High School in Lancaster, Calif., "looked like a star" in practice, despite some in-game growing pains. His coach said he was a "great kid" who did a fine job leading the older seniors. He was an honorable mention for the all-league team. But then he transferred out of town, to Franklin High in Stockton, where he spent his junior year living with an aunt and handing the ball off. His team featured two 1,000-yard rushers, and he completed only five passes all season. He transferred again: His senior year, he turned up at Paraclete High in Lancaster. Titus, his father, had become an assistant coach there. That's where he encountered Reba. His team lost in the semifinals. A season recap article suggested that he might sign with Hawaii, but that evidently went nowhere.

Once high school ended, in 2008, Tuiasosopo threw himself into his father's church. Titus is the pastor at the Oasis Christian Church of the Antelope Valley, and Ronaiah leads the church's band. He also has his own little YouTube music career. He sings [secular songs, with a cousin](#) (Conan Amituanai, a former Arizona lineman whom the Vikings once signed), and religious songs, both [solo](#) and [as part of an ensemble](#). "Ignite," the lead single on the group's ReverbNation page, is a likable enough song. It borrows its chorus from Katy Perry's catchy "Firework." But the song only has 10 Facebook likes, a fairly low figure that seems especially low once one considers who plugged Tuiasosopo's single on Twitter in December 2011: Manti Te'o.

Te'o and Tuiasosopo definitely know each other. In May 2012, Te'o was [retweeting Tuiasosopo](#), who had mentioned going to Hawaii. Wrote Te'o, "sole"—"bro," in Samoan—"u gotta come down." In June, Te'o wished Tuiasosopo [a happy birthday](#). How they know each other isn't clear. We spoke to a woman we'll call Frieda, who had suggested on Twitter back in December that there was something fishy about Lennay Kekua. She was Facebook friends with Titus Tuiasosopo, so we asked her if she knew anything about Ronaiah.

"Manti and Ronaiah are family," she said, "or at least family friends." She told us that the Tuiasosopos had been on-field guests (of Te'o or someone else, she didn't know) for the Nov. 24 Notre Dame-USC game in Los Angeles. USC was unable to confirm this, but a tweet from Tuiasosopo's since-deleted account suggests he and Te'o did see each other on that West Coast trip. "Great night with my bro @MTeo_5! #Heisman #574L," Ronaiah tweeted on Nov. 23, the night before the game.

And there was something else: Tuiasosopo had been in a car accident [a month before Lennay's supposed accident](#).

Was this Lennay Kekua? We spoke with friends and relatives of Ronaiah Tuiasosopo who asserted that Ronaiah was the man behind Lennay. He created Lennay in 2008, one source said, and Te'o wasn't the first person to have an online "relationship" with her. One mark—who had been "introduced" to Lennay by Tuiasosopo—lasted about a month before family members grew suspicious that Lennay could never be found on the telephone, and that wherever one expected Lennay to be, Ronaiah was there instead. Two sources discounted Ronaiah's stunt as a prank that only metastasized because of Te'o's rise to national celebrity this past season.

The hoax began crumbling around the edges late last year. On Nov. 4, 2012, an "U'ilani Rae Kekua," supposedly Lennay's sister, popped up on Twitter under the name @uilanirae. Manti Te'o immediately tweeted out the following

[mteo_5](#) Manti Te'o
Shout out to Ms.[@uilanirae](#) she's new to twitter and really needs some followers! One of the realist people I know.
[11/04/2012](#) [Reply](#) [Retweet](#) [Favorite](#) 3

Te'o also wished U'ilani a happy Thanksgiving on Nov. 22.

[uilanirae](#) u'ilani rae
i miss you [@LennayKay](#) our dinner for Daddy today was beautiful & it hit me hard that you weren't at the table. rest easy lala, love you sis.
[11/10/2012](#) [Reply](#) [Retweet](#) [Favorite](#)

Numerous Notre Dame fans sent U'ilani messages of condolence, and she responded with thanks. On Nov. 10, U'ilani tweeted the following:

A few weeks later, the @uilanirae account was deleted. The deletion came immediately after tweets from two now-suspended Twitter accounts had alleged that U'ilani was a fraud, that the

same person behind Lennay was operating the U'ilani account, and that the images of "U'ilani" were really of a woman named Donna Tei.

Tei's Twitter account is @FreDonna51zhun; Fred Matua wore No. 51, and Tei's profile is full of pictures of herself with the late football star (and cousin of Tuiasosopo's). We showed U'ilani's Twitter avatar to one of Tei's friends, and he confirmed it was her.

In yet another now-deleted tweet, Tei herself reached out to Nev Schulman, star of the 2010 film *Catfish* and executive producer of the MTV program of the same title. Schulman's movie and show are about romantic deception through fake online personas.

Manti Te'o, meanwhile, has deleted his tweets mentioning U'ilani.

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There was no *Lennay Kekua*. Lennay Kekua did not meet Manti Te'o after the Stanford game in 2009. Lennay Kekua did not attend Stanford. Lennay Kekua never visited Manti Te'o in Hawaii. Lennay Kekua was not in a car accident. Lennay Kekua did not talk to Manti Te'o every night on the telephone. She was not diagnosed with cancer, did not spend time in the hospital, did not engage in a lengthy battle with leukemia. She never had a bone marrow transplant. She was not released from the hospital on Sept. 10, nor did Brian Te'o congratulate her for this over the telephone. She did not insist that Manti Te'o play in the Michigan State or Michigan games, and did not request he send white flowers to her funeral. Her favorite color was not white. Her brother, Koa, did not inform Manti Te'o that she was dead. Koa did not exist. Her funeral did not take place in Carson, Calif., and her casket was not closed at 9 a.m. exactly. She was not laid to rest.



Lennay Kekua's last words to Manti Te'o were not "I love you."

A friend of Ronaiah Tuiasosopo told us he was "80 percent sure" that Manti Te'o was "in on it," and that the two perpetrated Lennay Kekua's death with publicity in mind. According to the friend, there were numerous photos of Ronaiah Tuiasosopo and Te'o together on Tuiasosopo's now-deleted Instagram account.

The sheer quantity of falsehoods about Manti's relationship with Lennay makes that friend, and another relative of Ronaiah's, believe Te'o had to know the truth. Mostly, though, the friend simply couldn't believe that Te'o would be stupid enough—or Ronaiah Tuiasosopo clever enough—to sustain the relationship for nearly a year.

Since Notre Dame was blown out in the BCS national championship game, Te'o has kept a low profile. He has tweeted sparingly, and he declined an invitation to the Senior Bowl. His father [made news recently](#) when he announced on the "Manti Te'o 'Official' Fan Club" Facebook page that he had "black listed" the *Honolulu Star-Advertiser*, which had carried a photo on its front page of Manti getting bowled over by Alabama's Eddie Lacy in the title game.

Te'o hasn't tweeted at Lennay since Nov. 6, when he wrote:

[@lennaykay](#) I miss you!

— Manti Te'o (@MTeo_5) [November 7, 2012](#)

As of this writing, Te'o's Twitter profile carries a quotation from Alexandre Dumas's *The Count of Monte Cristo*, the great adventure novel about a man in disguise.

Life is a storm.. You will bask in the sunlight one moment, be shattered on the rocks the next. What makes you a man is what you do when that storm comes.

We called a cellphone for Manti Te'o, but the number we had is not accepting calls. Brian Te'o, Manti's father, was in a meeting when we called, according to a text message he sent in response. Ronaiah Tuiasosopo did not answer his phone or respond to multiple text messages. We left a message with Notre Dame earlier this afternoon. We'll update with comments when and if we get any.

Update (5:17 p.m.): [Notre Dame responds:](#)

On Dec. 26, Notre Dame coaches were informed by Manti Te'o and his parents that Manti had been the victim of what appears to be a hoax in which someone using the fictitious name Lennay Kekua apparently ingratiated herself with Manti and then conspired with others to lead him to believe she had tragically died of leukemia. The University immediately initiated an investigation to assist Manti and his family in discovering the motive for and nature of this hoax. While the proper authorities will continue to investigate this troubling matter, this appears to be, at a minimum, a sad and very cruel deception to entertain its perpetrators.

Dennis Brown
University Spokesman | Assistant Vice President

Update (6:10 p.m.): [Manti Te'o's statement:](#)

This is incredibly embarrassing to talk about, but over an extended period of time, I developed an emotional relationship with a woman I met online. We maintained what I thought to be an authentic relationship by communicating frequently online and on the phone, and I grew to care deeply about her. To realize that I was the victim of what was apparently someone's sick joke and constant lies was, and is, painful and humiliating. It further pains me that the grief I felt and the sympathies expressed to me at the time of my grandmother's death in September were in any way deepened by what I believed to be another significant loss in my life. I am enormously grateful for the support of my family, friends and Notre Dame fans throughout this year. To think that I shared with them my happiness about my relationship and details that I thought to be true about her just makes me sick. I hope that people can understand how trying and confusing this whole experience has been. In retrospect, I obviously should have been much more cautious. If anything good comes of this, I hope it is that others will be far more guarded when they engage with people online than I was. Fortunately, I have many wonderful things in my life, and I'm looking forward to putting this painful experience behind me as I focus on preparing for the NFL Draft.