



Manti Te'o has finally broken his silence. For the first time since a report on Wednesday claimed the Notre Dame linebacker fabricated a relationship with a girl he knew as Lennay Kekua, Te'o granted ESPN's Jeremy Schaap an interview late Friday night.

The session, which was not conducted on camera, included Te'o's lawyer present while he spoke with Schaap. Te'o steadfastly maintained that he was never part of the hoax that has brought national embarrassment upon him over the course of the last three days. The interview took place at the IMG Training Academy in Bradenton, Fla, where Te'o is training for the upcoming NFL combine and draft.

He addressed several key topics including:

- **How they met.** Te'o says the relationship began when Kekua sent him a Facebook friend request when he was a freshman at Notre Dame. They had periodic off and on contact after that. "My relationship with Lennay wasn't a four-year relationship," Te'o told Schaap. "There were blocks and times and periods in which we would talk and then it would end."

- **How the relationship blossomed.** "She told me her dad passed away, and I was there. I

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Written by Sean Stires

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was that shoulder to cry on. And I kind of just naturally cared for the person," Te'o said. "And so our relationship kind of took another level, but not the kind of exclusive level yet."

- **How Kekua's web of lies sucked him farther into the hoax.** He thought the woman he knew was in a car accident on April 28, 2012. Her 'brother', known as 'Noah', told Te'o Kekua was in a coma. "I would ask to talk to her, and the only communication I had was through Noah, her brother, and he used her phone," Te'o said. "And he would put me supposedly right next to her mouth and I could hear the ventilator going. And she would be breathing...they said every time I was on the phone they would tell me the nurse noticed that whoever was on the phone with her, she must have recognized the voice, because she would start breathing quicker and I could hear on the phone." Te'o was told Kekua came out of the coma in mid-May and they began speaking on the phone every day.

- **How more tragedy had struck Kekua.** Te'o says late last June or in early July Kekua and her brother told him she had been diagnosed with leukemia. He says he and Kekua got in an argument on Sept. 12 after his grandmother had died. He was later told by Kekua's brother that Lennay had died.

- **How he first learned Kekua was a hoax.** Te'o says he received the Dec. 6 call that Notre Dame Athletic Director Jack Swarbrick referenced in his Wednesday night press conference. The call came from a phone number that Kekua had used. When he answered a woman told him there was something she needed to tell him, adding that it could wait until after the BCS Championship Game on Jan. 8 "I said you have to tell me now, because if you don't tell me now, I'm still going to think about it," Te'o recalled during his 2 ½ hour interview. "She said, well, Manti, it's me. That's all she said. And I played stupid for a little bit. I was like, 'Oh I know it's you, U'ilani (who was supposedly Kekua's sister). What do you mean?' And she's like, No, Manti, it's me. She said, 'It's Lennay'. So we carried on that conversation, and I just got mad. I just went on a rampage. 'How could you do this to me?' I ended that conversation by saying simply this: 'You know what? Lennay, my Lennay, died on Sept. 12'."

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- **Why he continued to speak of his girlfriend in interviews after that call.** Te'o says, as Swarbrick relayed, that he first told his parents and then Brian Kelly and Bob Diaco on the Irish coaching staff of the Dec. 6 call. He was asked about his girlfriend a handful of times though in media sessions prior to the Alabama game. He says he did so, because he was not sure himself about what had happened. "I didn't know myself. I didn't know what to believe," Te'o said. "All I knew for sure in my head was that she died on Sept. 12." He says the woman on the phone who claimed to be Kekua claimed she had faked her own death, because she was hiding from "drug people".

- **How he found out 'Lennay Kekua' never really existed.** Te'o says he never knew for sure if Kekua ever really existed until he received a direct message via Twitter from a man named Ronaiah Tuiasosopo. Te'o showed the message to Schaap during the interview. "Two guys and a girl are responsible for the whole thing," Te'o said. I asked who they are (and) he said: "I don't know. According to Ronaiah, Ronaiah's one."

- **He also cleared up several smaller points.** Te'o says he lied to his dad about meeting Kekua in person, which led to his father mentioning those meetings to reporters. Te'o had planned to meet Kekua in person several times, but she never showed up. Contrary to a South Bend Tribune report, Te'o says he never touched Kekua's hand in 2009. "I never told anybody that I've touched her hand," Te'o said. He says he didn't know the woman until 2010. Te'o says he met Tuiasosopo for the first time in Los Angeles after Notre Dame beat USC in the 2012 regular season finale. Te'o says his play in the BCS Championship Game was affected after a group connected to Tuiasosopo showed up at the team hotel in Miami. The group took photos in the hotel lobby and called Te'o to tell him they were waiting for Kekua to join them.