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# Family of Lawrence teen killed during gas explosions settles lawsuit

Kimberly Bookman | Associated Press

BOSTON (AP) — The family of a high school student who was killed during a series of natural gas explosions in Massachusetts last year has reached a settlement with the utility involved in the disaster, a lawyer for the family and the company announced Tuesday.

Financial details were not disclosed.

Leonel Rondon, of Lawrence, Massachusetts, died Sept. 13 after the chimney of an exploding house crashed onto his car and crushed him. The 18-year-old Rondon had received his driver's license just hours earlier.

Rondon's family filed a wrongful death lawsuit against Columbia Gas of Massachusetts.

The explosions and fires in the Merrimack Valley communities of Lawrence, Andover and North Andover also injured about 25 other people and damaged or destroyed more than 100 homes. Thousands of homes and businesses in the region were without natural gas service for weeks or months after the disaster.

Investigators from the National Transportation Safety Board blamed the explosions on overpressurization of gas lines in the area.

"We recognize the pain that remains and understand that nothing we can ever say or do will bring Leonel back to his loved ones or erase that pain," Joe Hamrock, president and chief executive of NISource Inc., the parent company of Columbia Gas, said in a statement. "Since this tragic event, we have always wanted to do the right thing for the Rondon family and all of those affected."

Columbia Gas said it would establish a scholarship fund in Rondon's name, independent of the settlement, which the two sides said was reached with the help of a mediator.

The law firm that represented Rondon's family also planned to establish a scholarship fund in honor of the teen, according to Doug Sheff, the family's attorney.

Rondon, a high school junior, was "full of life" and loved science and music, Sheff said.

"He dreamt of going to college and cared for his family members in every way possible. His mother, Rosaly, described Leonel as 'the happiness of the house.' The family can only hope that this kind of catastrophe will never happen again," Sheff said.

The settlement was announced the same day that elected officials and business leaders held an unrelated news conference to announce a marketing campaign to help small businesses in the communities that are still struggling to get back on their feet nearly ten months after the explosions.

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