

Family of Lawrence teen killed in Merrimack Valley gas explosions will work for safe environment

By [Travis Andersen](#) Globe Staff , July 10, 2019, 12:52 p.m.



Attorney Doug Sheff (center) spoke Wednesday while surrounded by the family of Leonel Rondon. (SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF)

The family of a Lawrence teenager killed last September when [gas fires and explosions erupted in the Merrimack Valley](#) made their first public appearance Wednesday, following the settlement of a wrongful death lawsuit they had filed against Columbia Gas of Massachusetts.

Relatives of 18-year-old [Leonel Rondon](#), including his parents, stood next to their lead attorney, Doug Sheff, during a morning news conference at Sheff's Boston office, where the lawyer said Rondon's family will continue working for a "safe environment" for the public.

Sheff's comments came one day after Columbia Gas [announced the settlement](#). The terms are confidential.

"Leonel Rondon was a loving, supportive family member and friend," Sheff said Wednesday. "He was only 18 years old and very much full of life. He loved science, music, but most of all he loved his family. And he will be sorely missed forever."

Sheff, who did not take questions or make his clients available for comment because of the confidential settlement, added that the family's work isn't done.

ADVERTISING

[Learn more](#)



"The family intends to preserve the memory of Leonel in many ways which will serve our community, our Commonwealth, and indeed our country," Sheff said. "We are proud that a new national pipeline safety bill has recently been named after this wonderful young man."

In addition, Sheff said, his firm will establish “a scholarship fund in order to encourage fire and explosion prevention in the future, as well as public safety. And we will continue to work with the Rondons in order to maintain a safe environment for all of us and for all of our loved ones.”

Columbia Gas had said Tuesday in a statement that the settlement was the result of “voluntary mediation between the parties.”

Joe Hamrock, chief executive officer and president of NiSource Inc., parent company of Columbia Gas, was also quoted in the utility’s release.

“We remain heartbroken over the tragic loss of Leonel Rondon and again express our deepest sympathy to his family and to the entire community,” Hamrock said. “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. Since this tragic event, we have always wanted to do the right thing for the Rondon family and all of those affected, and we are pleased to have reached this settlement. We are grateful for the opportunity to work with the Rondon family to honor Leonel through a scholarship fund, and we will continue to honor his memory.”

Rondon, a student at Phoenix Charter Academy in Lawrence, [died Sept. 13, 2018](#), after a chimney from a house that exploded toppled onto the vehicle he was sitting in at a friend’s house on Chickering Road.

Two dozen people were injured in the blasts. Five homes exploded, and 125 structures were damaged by fire. Thousands of residents across Lawrence, Andover, and North Andover went without heat or hot water for weeks during the onset of cold weather, forced to live in hotels and portable trailers as crews worked to repair the gas system. Some braved the dropping temperatures, cooking on hot plates and warming parts of their homes with space heaters.

Additional lawsuits remain pending.

Sheff on Wednesday concluded his brief remarks by expressing hope that the tragic circumstances that claimed the life of Rondon won't be repeated.

“Let us never allow such a catastrophe to happen again,” Sheff said. “Let us never forget the name Leonel Rondon.”

Travis Andersen can be reached at travis.andersen@globe.com. Follow him on Twitter [@TAGlobe](https://twitter.com/TAGlobe).

[Show comments](#)

©2019 Boston Globe Media Partners, LLC