

## Merrimack Valley gas explosions

### Family of teen killed settles suit

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LAWRENCE — 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, 18, of Lawrence, died Sept. 13 after the chimney of an exploding house crashed onto his car and crushed him.

He 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," said Joe Hamrock, president and chief executive of NiSource Inc., the parent company of Columbia Gas, 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, and we are pleased to have reached this settlement."

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 planned an unrelated news conference to update economic recovery efforts in the three communities, nearly 10 months since the explosions.

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