

# 2019 LAWYERS OF THE YEAR

## DOUGLAS K. SHEFF Sheff Law

**F**rom their Lawrence home, Leonel Rondon's family can see the city square that's been named in memory of the 18-year-old who lost his life in the gas explosions that rocked the Merrimack Valley on Sept. 13, 2018.

The family's attorney, Boston's Douglas K. Sheff, helped make that happen in 2019, along with a confidential settlement Columbia Gas agreed to pay the Rondon family and a scholarship fund the utility is setting up in Leonel's name.

The teen, who was killed when a chimney from a nearby house fell on the car he was sitting in, was the only fatality in the catastrophe that caused mass destruction in the communities of Lawrence, Andover and North Andover.

*"We expect the legacy of this case to be a federal statute that will protect kids like Leonel and, frankly, all of us no matter where we are, from Massachusetts to California."*

Calling it "one of the most significant cases of our time," Sheff traveled to D.C. to work with lawmakers on crafting a federal statute aimed at protecting the public from similar gas explosions in the future.

"Only in this country can a hardworking Dominican family in Lawrence really have an effect on millions of people," Sheff says of the proposed Leonel Rondon Pipeline Safety Act, which was spurred by his clients' wish that their son's memory "live on and be strong."

The Rondon case came on the heels of another ultra-high-profile matter that kept Sheff and his downtown personal injury firm on their toes. The veteran trial lawyer was in the news for brokering a settlement in the wrongful death case filed by his client Ursula Ward, whose son, Odin Lloyd, was murdered by New England Patriots tight end Aaron Hernandez in 2015. Terms of the deal reached with Hernandez's estate are confidential.

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### Can you describe the settlement process in the Rondon case?

The mediation took place over months. There were several discussions, sometimes with several weeks in between. Using experts, and sometimes advocacy of other sorts, little by little it came together. It was a slow-motion mediation, like building a house from the foundation up. Like so many other things about this case, I have not experienced anything like it.

### Were there any stumbling blocks in the mediation?

There were a lot of people involved in this process, so it's not the same as dealing with one lawyer or an adjuster. Here, you had a billion-



dollar utility. And, of course, they have their own means of communications and processes they need to go through. So that provided some stumbling blocks.

### What was the biggest challenge the case presented?

The damages aspect of the case presented multiple challenges. In wrongful death cases, especially under the Massachusetts wrongful death statute, it's very difficult to get a tremendous value when you have a single teenager with no spouse and no children. The statute concentrates on the family members who survive.

### Aside from maximizing the financial recovery for the family, what were your goals in handling this case?

In high-profile cases such as this, you have more than just the law available to you to get the best result for your client. We were constantly educating the public, which is one way of remembering Leonel. [The family] wanted a street sign near their home with Leonel's name on it. Instead, we got them an entire city square right next to their home with Leonel's name and his image. It's almost like a little park area. That was as — if not more — important than any financial compensation they could have received.

### You also turned to federal lawmakers to help bring about change.

I worked with Senator Ed Markey's folks and Congresswoman Lori Trahan to craft the Leonel Rondon Pipeline Safety Act. It just passed through committee in the House and is on its way to the Senate. We expect this to be law, and we expect the legacy of this case, and of Leonel and the Rondon family, to be a federal statute that will protect kids like Leonel and, frankly, all of us no matter where we are, from Massachusetts to California.

The family wanted Leonel's death not to be in vain, and that inspired us to do several things. The family certainly appreciates being made whole financially. But look at the world of things we were able to establish for them by using not

just the courts, but by using the media as well as the Legislature.

### Could the natural gas explosions that upended the Merrimack Valley occur again somewhere around here?

These old pipelines, regardless of who's in control of them, are running below us where we sleep, where we eat, where we go to school, where we work. It doesn't matter if you have gas or not in your house. They're under us wherever we are. So, of course, if not properly maintained, a gas leak or an explosion or fire can happen in any town, in any state, in any country. That's why the Leonel Rondon Pipeline Safety Act is a wonderful step to protecting people at least in this country. It goes way beyond the commonwealth.

### Why do you think the Rondon family thought you were the right lawyer to take their case?

They saw we had a track record; that was part of it. The other part of it is that this firm feels more like a family than an office. We have a true team approach. Everybody in this firm was involved in the case. It was an intense, concentrated effort.

### You've said that the Hernandez case had you "spinning." How so?

Because it had everything in it. There were celebrities. There were superstar athletes. There was murder. There was suicide. There was traumatic brain injury. It had verdicts that were given and then taken away and then reinstated. And the list goes on and on. You could teach a couple years of law school through this one case. It was just a complex scenario.

### Given its complexity, were there any lessons learned or takeaways from the case for you and the firm?

The case would change every couple of weeks. It was like throwing darts while running on a treadmill. The Hernandez case taught us a lot about working as a team because of the moving targets and the minefield of issues.

— Henriette Campagne