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'Teach These Guys a Lesson': Lawsuits Fly After Broward Gas Explosion

"This is like sitting next to a roadside bomb in Iraq. But they weren't in an armored Humvee with a helmet on. They were in a gym," one plaintiffs lawyer said.

By Raychel Lean | July 20, 2020



This image taken from video provided by WPLG shows debris covering the parking lot of a shopping center after an explosion on Saturday, July 6, 2019 in Plantation, Fla. The explosion happened Saturday morning at the shopping center, west of Fort Lauderdale in Broward County. The blast sent large pieces of debris about 100 yards (about 91 meters) across the street. (WPLG via AP)

A gas explosion that injured 23 people at a Plantation shopping center in 2019 has resulted in a different sort of explosion — of premises liability lawsuits in Broward County.

More than 14 South Florida firms have filed suit, including Anidjar & Levine, Colson Hicks Eidson, Koppel & Associates, Krupnick Campbell Malone, Leeder Law and Russomanno & Borrello.

The litigation is all about corporate responsibility, according to Fort Lauderdale attorney Sam Coffey of Coffey Trial Law, who represents six people injured in the blast.

"We're going to send a message and teach these guys a lesson," Coffey said. "This is about shaping and changing corporate behavior. My favorite cases are those where we can change corporate behavior to stop them [businesses] from doing things that can injure people, making the world a little more safe. There's no reason under the sun why a gas line should explode in a shopping center."

Among the plaintiffs is Dominic Dattilio (<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1erhsILSLV-1508hRKNYGrXuOpXBPr6BV/view?usp=sharing>), who was exercising with his wife Teri inside LA Fitness when they experienced what felt like an earthquake, as the building shook and glass went flying.

"It just happened so quick that I was not really sure what happening, but as the ceiling tiles and everything started coming down around us, I jumped over Teri to kind of shield her," Dattilio said. "I can't believe that we walked out of that building and there were no fatalities whatsoever."

The defendants include landlord Locust Gardens (E&A) LLC, property manager Edens Limited Partnership, utility providers Peoples Gas System, Tampa Electric Co. and Best Buy Auctioneers.com Inc., which removed a gas pizza stove from the restaurant where the explosion occurred.

Plaintiffs attorneys have had to piece together what happened, aided by drone and dash cam footage, witness statements and a cause-and-origin report from Florida's Bureau of Fire and Arson and Explosives Investigations, which found a gas valve had been left open in an abandoned pizza place. The AC had also been left on, causing a reaction when the thermostat clicked on, court filings show.

The aptly-named PizzaFire restaurant had gone out of business months earlier, according to the lawsuits, which allege the explosion wouldn't have happened if the gas pipe had the appropriate cap on, or a valve behind the building had been locked.

But instead, someone turned on the gas line at around 7 a.m. on July 6, causing what Coffey said was akin to a bomb.

"This is like sitting next to a roadside bomb in Iraq," Coffey said. "But they weren't in an armored Humvee with a helmet on. They were in a gym."

The cap would have cost about \$2, according to Coffey, who said no one knows who turned on the valve or why, but the fact that it was able to happen amounts to gross negligence.

"We think that this is worthy of punitive damages because it's grossly negligent to allow an uncapped gas line to flow into a building and explode a building in downtown Plantation," Coffey said. "The fact the landlords, from December until July, didn't go into the building and say, 'Hey, there's a gas line without a cap or a valve on it,' or call a plumber in there or simply put on a \$2 cap, is outrageous."

Plaintiffs lawyers Joseph Kalbac and Denise Georges of Colson Hicks Eidson in Coral Gables seconded that, noting that a nearby children's coding camp wasn't open on that day.

"The owners, because of the long holiday weekend, decided to close on Saturday. Otherwise, there would have been a whole bunch of children in that particular location and they probably all would have been killed," Kalbac said. "It's very fortunate that nobody was injured more than my client."

They represent Matthew Seese (<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1y3OvbliLqA3NivUJRqMkpyBMZtdoSx2K/view?usp=sharing>), who was closest to PizzaFire when it exploded as he walked from the gym to his car. He suffered major damage to his hand and ankle.

It was a challenge to untangle what happened, according to Kalbac and Georges, who said the litigation demonstrates the importance of retaining experts and starting investigations as soon as possible.

Counsel to Locust Gardens and Edens, Tanya Irene Suarez of Wilson Elser Moskowitz Edelman & Dicker in Miami, did not immediately respond to a request for comment. Peoples Gas, Tampa Electric and Best Buy Auctioneers also did not immediately respond and have yet to retain counsel, according to online case files.

But plaintiffs attorneys say there's plenty of insurance coverage among the defendants, who could be on the hook for millions. The cases will likely be consolidated into one for discovery purposes before going their separate ways.

Dattilio, who works as a sports television cameraman, said the blast hit him in the face and chest, and has caused long-term problems such as anxiety and cognitive issues, while his wife suffered back injuries as she was on a machine at the time.

"Going to the gym was always my place to destress. It was the one place I could belong, to go and feel good," Dattilio said. "Now it's one of my places of stress."

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