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Day care owner joins those suing Columbia Gas

By Jill Harmacinski Staff Writer Dec 18, 2018



SALEM — The owners of a North Andover home where a day care business also operated are among those suing Columbia Gas after a series of gas-driven fires and explosions across the Merrimack Valley on Sept. 13, according to court papers.

Attorneys for Dean Thornhill and his wife, Mona, and their children, are scheduled to be in Salem Superior Court on Wednesday for a court appearance in a civil lawsuit filed after the incidents in Lawrence, Andover and North Andover now three months ago.

Both individual and class-action suits have been filed against Columbia Gas and its parent company, NiSource.

One major lawsuit previously filed involves Omayra Figueroa and her children whose home at 36 Chickering Road, Lawrence, exploded during the gas disaster.

Omayra's daughter, Shakira, 21, was critically injured during the blast and has undergone six surgeries so far on the lower half of her body, said attorney Socrates De La Cruz of Lawrence, who is representing the family, on Monday.

"The family is still going through extreme psychological, emotional and physical hardship," De La Cruz said Monday.

The family of Leonel Rondon, 18, who was killed during the Chickering Road house explosion, has also said they will sue Columbia Gas.

Rondon, a newly licensed driver, died after the home's chimney collapsed on his SUV in the driveway.

Essex County Superior Court Judge James Lang has been “specially assigned” to preside over cases filed in relation to the Merrimack Valley gas disaster, according to court papers.

Dean and Mona Thornhill and their son, Nathan, reside in a home at 28-30 East Water St. in North Andover.

Their son, William Thornhill and his wife, Rebecca Crockett-Thornhill, of Methuen, also ran a day care at 30 East Water St., North Andover, according to the lawsuit, filed by attorneys David Raimondo, Patrick Haines and Brian Cunha.

On the afternoon of Sept. 13, Dean Thornhill saw “the pilot light in his stove was acting in an abnormal manner,” according to the suit.

Thornhill immediately shut off the stove’s gas and went to the basement to check on the home’s gas powered heating system.

“As he headed down the steep stairs into the basement, (Thornhill) observed a veritable flame-thrower spewing out of the heating system,” according to the lawsuit.

The suit notes that unbeknownst to Thornhill, “this scenario was playing out all over the area as more than 70 homes erupted in flames” due to the over-pressurization of gas lines.

The Thornhill’s home sustained \$500,000 in smoke and fire damage, the day care business was forced to close and family members have suffered from “mental anguish and undue stress which manifests itself as physical conditions including but not limited to insomnia, digestive problems and headaches,” according to the lawsuit.

The suit cites negligence, breach of warranties, malicious conduct and negligent infliction of emotional distress.

Haines, an attorney with Napoli Shkolnik, PLLC, of Austin, Texas, said he plans to be in superior court on Wednesday for the initial court appearance. He said he has a professional background with class-action suits which “are good for some cases” but not necessarily appropriate for Merrimack Valley gas disaster cases.

The gas disaster cases “involve such varied individual personal stories and trauma. I think most of my clients have (post-traumatic stress disorder) and I don’t see how a class action can be used for that,” Haines said.

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