

\$23.5M settlement reached in school bus death suit

By Steven Crighton

The family of a 19-year-old nonverbal autistic student who died from hyperthermia after being left in a hot school bus for hours reached a \$23.5 million settlement, Panish Shea & Boyle LLP announced Monday.

Armando Ramirez, a bus driver for defendant Pupil Transportation Cooperative, left the student, Hun Joon "Paul" Lee, aboard the vehicle at Sierra Vista Adult School in Whittier. According to the complaint, Ramirez had been distracted by texts from a fellow driver who he left the vehicle to have sex with, oblivious to the fact that Lee was still aboard.

The day was one of the hottest of the year, and according to the Lee family attorney, Brian Panish, not even a window was cracked. When he failed to return home, Lee's mother contacted the school system. Lee was found dead on the bus.

Ramirez plead guilty to a felony charge of dependent abuse resulting in death and was sentenced to two years in prison. A civil suit against Pupil Transportation Cooperative was scheduled for trial next week but settled Friday. *Lee et al v. Pupil Transportation Cooperative*, BC603251 (L.A. Super. Ct., June 9, 2017).

Lee's death prompted legislation and policy changes. Whittier Union High School District implemented ID cards to track students and a rule to call a student's home or the bus company if the student cannot be found within 30 minutes of school starting.

Lee's parents pushed for legislation that would help prevent such an incident in the future. Gov. Jerry Brown signed the Paul Lee School Bus Safety Law in September, requiring all school buses in the state to be equipped with a child safety alarm system that must be manually deactivated by bus drivers. Bus drivers must receive child-safety check training under the law.

Panish said that while he was pleased with the settlement, the legislation is the more important victory.

"The family worked very hard, as did we, to get the [law] passed so that hopefully this won't happen anymore," Panish said. "The family went through such a horrific loss — they're feeling good about being able to hopefully make a difference."

The Pupil Transportation Cooperative and its attorney, Randall L. Winet of Winet Patrick Gayer Creighton & Hanes, could not be reached for comment Monday.

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