



Shiho Fukada for The New York Times

Junior Suarez, left, the first person to aid Gregory McCullough, who was hurt in a steam pipe explosion on July 18, met the victim's mother, Tanya McCullough-Stewart, and stepfather, Frank Stewart, center.

Family Thanks Samaritan in Steam Blast

By TRYMAINE LEE

The family of Gregory McCullough, the 21-year-old student and tow truck driver who suffered extensive burns in the steam pipe explosion in Midtown Manhattan on July 18, met for the first time yesterday with the good Samaritan who comforted their son immediately after the blast.

The family and Junior Suarez, 27, who said he held Mr. McCullough in his arms until emergency workers arrived, were brought together by the family's lawyers as they announced an impending lawsuit against Consolidated Edison and possibly the City of New York among others.

In a room filled with camera people and reporters, Mr. Suarez broke down in tears yesterday as he recounted the scene on the day of the explosion. He spoke of the dust and debris whirling in the air, the panic of those scrambling to escape the geyser of steam and mud, and he recalled the moment he saw Mr. McCullough, emerging from a cloud of dust, bloodied and dazed.

Mr. McCullough's mother, Tanya McCullough-Stewart, and stepfather, Frank Stewart, comforted Mr. Suarez as he broke down. Mr. Suarez said Mr. McCullough "looked me in

An explosion victim's relatives meet a man who offered comfort.

the eye," and said " 'Promise me I'm not going to die.' "

Ms. McCullough-Stewart said she was thankful for Mr. Suarez's act of kindness amid the chaos of the moment. When the two met yesterday morning, Ms. McCullough-Stewart said, she wrapped her arms around him and did not want to let him go.

"We were just thankful that someone was there to hold him, and that he wasn't suffering by himself," a moist-eyed Ms. McCullough-Stewart said. Her son suffered third-degree burns on more than 80 percent of his body and was placed in a medically induced coma shortly after the explosion. He was taken to the New York-Presbyterian/Weill Cornell hospital, where he remained yesterday in critical condition.

The family was also joined by a handful of Mr. McCullough's friends from the Marine Cadet Corps program and the family's pastor, A. R. Bernard of the Christian Cultural

Center in East New York, Brooklyn.

Mr. McCullough's family has retained lawyers, Ken Thompson of Thompson, Wigdor & Gilly and Derek Sells of the Cochran Firm, who said they had started an investigation of the explosion.

Mr. Thompson and Mr. Sells said that there is evidence indicating that Con Edison, which owns the pipes, was aware of the issues afflicting the 82-year-old pipes near 41st Street and Lexington Avenue. "There is a history of problems at that intersection," Mr. Thompson said.

Mr. Sells said that he saw in the many steam pipe explosions in the city in the past 18 years "a pattern of neglect." In 1989, a steam pipe in Gramercy Park exploded, killing three people and causing millions of dollars in damages.

Judith Bailey, 31, whose car had been disabled and was a passenger in the tow truck on July 18, remained hospitalized yesterday, with burns over 30 percent of her body.

A Con Ed spokesman, Joseph Petta, would not directly comment yesterday on the possible litigation.

"Our thoughts and prayers go out to all of the victims and their families," Mr. Petta said. "As repairs progress, we will continue to work with outside experts to help determine the cause of this event."