

Family of pipe blast victim plans suit

BY MATTHEW CHAYES

Special to Newsday

The tow-truck driver burned over most of his body in the midtown steam pipe explosion could remain in a medically induced coma for three months and attorneys for the man's family said yesterday they plan to sue the utility company that owns the pipe.

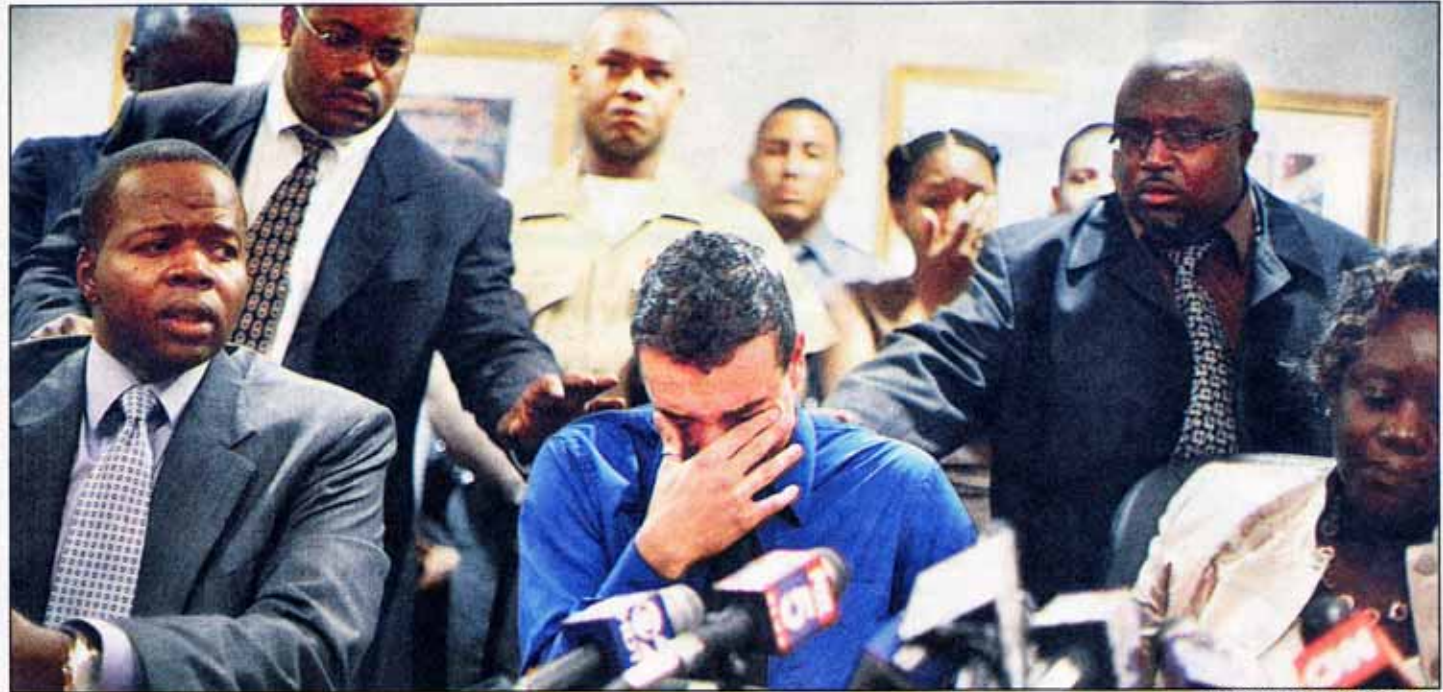


Gregory McCullough

As Gregory McCullough, 21, undergoes multiple skin and muscle-removal surgeries, the driver is being kept sedated to ease his intense pain, McCullough family attorney Derek Sells said.

The early evening explosion on July 18 pulled McCullough's tow truck, which had been on the street near the underground pipe, into a crater at 41st Street and Lexington Avenue near Grand Central Terminal. The steam scorched the aspiring Marine and killed a nearby pharmaceutical executive, Lois Ellen Baumerich, 51, who died from a heart attack.

More than 80 percent of McCullough's body was burned in the blast, and he remains in critical condition in a medically induced coma at New York-Presbyterian Hospital/Weill Cor-



NEWSDAY PHOTO / MOISES SAMAN

Junior Suarez, center, assisted tow-truck driver Gregory McCullough, burned over 80 percent of his body in pipe explosion.

nell Medical Center.

McCullough's hospital bills will likely exceed \$1 million, Thompson said yesterday at a news conference. Doctors predict that McCullough will need expensive medical care for the rest of his life.

Another attorney, Kenneth Thompson, said the family expects to sue the utility, Consolidated Edison. The family is also considering suing contractors who may have worked on the steam-pipe site and "any entity

responsible for this explosion."

Con Ed spokeswoman Elizabeth Clark said workers patched a minor leak at the site in March and that an inspection about a month before the explosion showed "no signs of trouble" there. The utility's investigation into the explosion is continuing, she said.

A spokeswoman for the city's Law Department, Laura Postiglione, said, "We understand it's a tragic case, but we can't comment on pending litigation."

As of yesterday, no papers had been filed on behalf of McCullough's family at the State Supreme Court in Manhattan.

For now, McCullough's family is praying for his recovery. McCullough's mother, Tanya McCullough-Stewart, said she sings Christian songs at the bedside of her only son. She believes he hears her.

"As a mother, you know your child. To see him grimacing in the hospital and not being able to convey that in words," his

mother said. "You know — you just know your child is in pain. And there's nothing you can do about it. Nothing."

During the news conference, good Samaritan Junior Suarez, who cradled McCullough as he howled in agony the evening of the explosion, recalled the horror of the moment. "There were people, which I couldn't understand, just right next to him and they just walked by, like he didn't matter or something," Suarez said.