

Trial over fatal blast ends today

By Joe Gerrety
Journal and Courier

A jury could decide late today whether Indiana Gas Co. is at fault when a seven-day civil trial concludes in the July 15, 1998, gas explosion that killed a Lafayette woman.

During testimony, as the final witness in the trial, the home's owner, Ruth Aretz, disclosed that she was dismissed as a defendant in the case after settling out of court for \$325,000.

Attorneys representing the estate of Stephanie Ramirez Brogan are expected to ask a jury to award far more money during closing arguments scheduled to begin at 1 p.m. today in Tippecanoe Superior Court 2.

Brogan, 25, died eight days after the explosion, which caused severe burns to 67 percent of her body. She left a husband and a 7-year-old son.

"I am innocent. I paid because I did not want to be here. I am not happy with any of you," Aretz told plaintiff's attorney Charles R. Vaughan after he asked why she settled out of court before the trial began.

A third defendant, H.H. Gregg Appliances and Electronics Inc., reached a confidential out-of-court settlement last week, two days into the trial.

Jurors will be instructed that they still can assign a percentage of fault for the fatal explosion to Aretz and H.H. Gregg. That would reduce the amount Indiana Gas, now known as Vectren Corp., would have to pay if it is found liable.

Investigators determined

that an uncapped gas line to a utility room had gone undiscovered when John Austin, a serviceman for Indiana Gas, turned on the gas at the rental house at 1013 Linden Drive, filling the house with gas.

On July 15, Stephanie Ramirez Brogan called the gas company to report the smell of gas. Moments later, the house blew up.

Norman T. Funk, attorney for Indiana Gas, has admitted the gas company is partly at fault, but he claims Aretz and H.H. Gregg share responsibility.

According to testimony, months before the explosion, an H.H. Gregg delivery man delivering an electric dryer to the home noticed a gas line sticking out of the wall of the laundry room and pushed it back through the hole in the wall, hiding it from view.

Indiana Gas argues Aretz is liable because some of the gas lines in the house weren't properly installed and because she failed to point out the existence of the hidden gas line to the Brogans before they began moving in.

Aretz testified Tuesday she had no knowledge of standard gas lines in the house before the explosion. She said she thinks the gas company should have checked for uncapped lines before turning on the gas. She doesn't think she's responsible.

Aretz said she settled out of court because she was distraught over the recent death of her daughter, and she didn't want to go through the emotional trauma of a trial in which she would be blamed for causing Brogan's death.

She said her insurance company, State Farm Insurance, paid her policy limit — \$300,000 — and she paid \$25,000 from her own assets after Vaughan demanded more.



Brogan

2001-07-31 Lafayette trial over fatal gas blast ends today



Clipped By:

criswest

Thu, Nov 17, 2022