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CHP settles suit over leaked photos of dead O.C. girl

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Five years after grisly photographs of an Orange County teen killed in a car accident began spreading online, the young woman's family has settled a lawsuit filed against the California Highway Patrol for its role in disseminating the graphic images taken at the scene.

The family filed a lawsuit against the CHP, launching an unprecedented legal discussion well before terms like cyber-bullying became part of the lexicon.

The photos from the Halloween 2006 accident show 18-year-old Nicole "Nikki" Catsouras maimed and nearly decapitated in her father's mangled Porsche.

The pictures, taken by CHP investigators, were never intended for public release but were leaked by two highway patrol dispatchers.

Catsouras crashed after taking her father's car without permission, accelerating to speeds above 100 mph on the 241 toll road in south Orange County. She clipped another car and swerved into a toll booth.

The young woman was so badly disfigured her family hadn't been allowed to see her body after the crash, but images of the gruesome scene began proliferating online, appearing on thousands of websites.

On many of the sites, Catsouras — dubbed "Porsche girl" — was mocked as a spoiled rich girl who deserved to die. Anonymous taunting messages were also sent to the family's home.

A simple Web search of the family's last name still brings up the images and links to such sites as bestgore.com. And the family has said they avoid using the Internet so they don't encounter the photos.

"This has been a long journey," Keith Bremer, an attorney for the Ladera Ranch family, said of the case. The family, through Bremer, declined to comment Monday.

An Orange County Superior Court judge initially threw out the family's lawsuit, concluding that the agency had not breached any legal duty to the family. At the time, the law did not recognize the right of family members to sue for invasion of privacy involving photos of the dead.

But that changed in 2010 when the state's 4th District Court of Appeal reversed the decision. For the first time in California, the court established that surviving family members have a right to sue for invasion of privacy in such cases.

Over the years, the family has gone through extended efforts to find ways to remove the photos. But as soon as the images were taken down on some sites, they would sprout up elsewhere.

"I'm determined to get them off the Internet," the teen's father, Christos Catsouras, told The Times in 2010, "although I've been told by every single person who's an Internet expert that we will never get them removed."

Despite the efforts proving futile thus far, the CHP agreed to cooperate with the family in fighting to remove the images from the Internet as a part of the settlement.

In a statement from their attorney, the family said it hopes this case will help others who get caught up in such nightmares. And for the Catsouras family, the settlement might finally allow them some closure.

"I think they can finally put this chapter behind them," Bremer said.

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-- Rick Rojas

Photo: Nicole "Nikki" Catsouras. Credit: Catsouras family

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