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## CHP settles over leaked photos of woman killed in crash

**The family of Nicole Catsouras receives about \$2.37 million after photos of their daughter, who was killed in a crash in 2006, appeared on the Internet.**

By Rick Rojas, Los Angeles Times

January 31, 2012

Five years after grisly photographs of an Orange County teen killed in a car accident began appearing 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 lawsuit launched an unprecedented legal discussion about the Internet.

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 were taken by CHP investigators and were never intended for public release but were leaked by two Highway Patrol dispatchers.

Catsouras crashed after taking her father's car without permission and accelerating to speeds of more than 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 that her family wasn't allowed to see her body after the crash, but images of the gruesome scene began multiplying online, appearing on thousands of websites.

On many of them, Catsouras — dubbed as "Porsche girl" — was mocked as a spoiled rich girl who deserved to die. Messages taunting the family were also sent anonymously to their home.

Years later, a Web search of the family's last name still brings up the images. The family has said they avoid using the Internet to avoid seeing 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.

Under terms of the settlement, the Catsouras family received about \$2.37 million in damages.

"No amount of money can compensate for the pain the Catsouras family has suffered," CHP spokeswoman Fran Clader said in a statement. "We have reached a resolution with the family to save

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substantial costs of continued litigation and a jury trial. It is our hope that with this legal issue resolved, the Catsouras family can receive some closure."

An Orange County Superior Court judge initially threw out the family's lawsuit, reaching the conclusion the agency had not breached any legal duty to the family. The law, at the time, 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 from websites. But as soon as they were taken down on some sites, they would be posted elsewhere.

"I'm determined to get them off the Internet," her 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 Highway Patrol 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 other families who get caught up in virtual nightmares. And it might finally allow them some closure.

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

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