

Los Angeles Times

Family Wins Settlement in Traffic Death of Ojai Man

■ **Accident:** Michael Torrey was killed in March 2000 when his pickup was hit by an oncoming truck. His wife and two sons will receive \$2.68 million.

By ANNA GORMAN
TIMES STAFF WRITER

The family of an Ojai man killed last year when a truck careened into oncoming traffic won a \$2.68-million settlement from a Paramount trucking company Thursday.

Michael Edwin Torrey, 39, died March 8, 2000, when his Ford Ranger pickup collided with a semi-truck that had crossed the Ventura Freeway median. The truck's driver, Pablo Solorio of Los Angeles, had been fired from Mountain Valley Express three months earlier for unsafe driving but was pulling a trailer for the company that morning, according to court papers.

Torrey's family filed a wrongful death suit in Ventura County Superior Court a month later. After several settlement conferences, attorneys reached an agreement Wednesday and finalized it Thursday.

Loree Torrey, 38, said she hopes that the trucking company will learn from her husband's death and from the lawsuit.

"It was a horrible accident," she said. "I just would hate for this to happen to anybody else."

Torrey added that she is thankful she won't have to go through a trial but is frustrated that Solorio is still driving. "I hate that he is on the road," she said. "But he'll have

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his day in court."

The Ventura County district attorney's office filed misdemeanor vehicular manslaughter charges against Solorio. His trial is scheduled later this month.

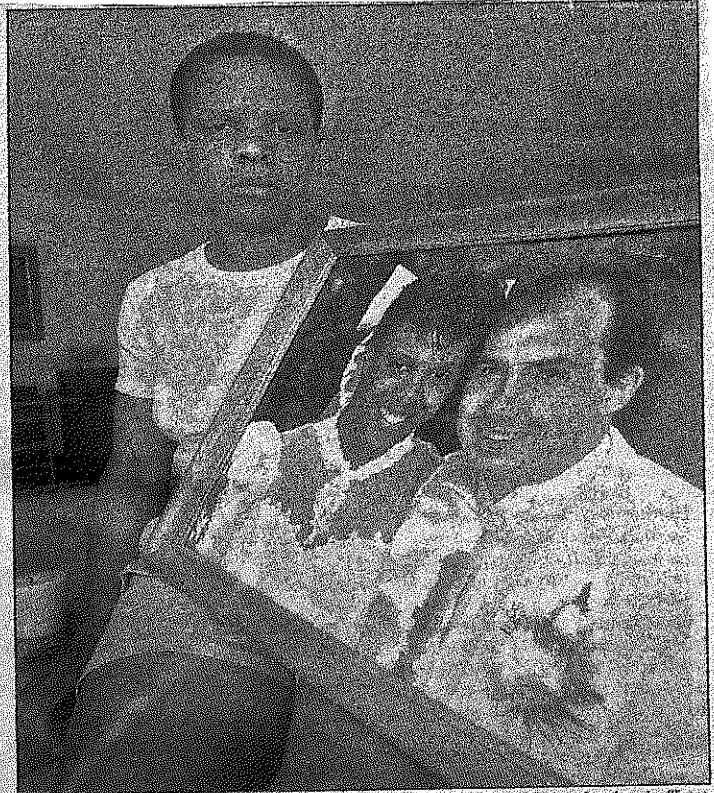
Mark Hiepler, an Oxnard-based attorney who represented Torrey and the couple's 6- and 9-year-old sons in the civil suit, said supervisors at the trucking company knew that Solorio had an atrocious driving record. He started working for the company in June 1995 and got into two accidents before being fired in late 1999, court papers said.

Despite his accident record and a previous drunk-driving arrest, Solorio was hired in January 2000 by Red Wing Transport, which pulled trailers for Mountain Valley, court papers said.

Hiepler said officials for Mountain Valley attempted to avoid liability by saying that Red Wing Transport and Solorio were independent contractors. But they worked only for Mountain Valley and so were essentially employees of the trucking company, he said.

"What we uncovered was an insurance scam that allowed the trucking company to rehire a driver they knew was unsafe," Hiepler said. "Clearly, Michael Torrey would still be alive with his family if not for this scam."

Hiepler said he plans to meet with lawmakers to discuss possible legislation that would prevent truck drivers who are terminated for unsafe driving from being rehired unless they receive appropriate training and penalties.



RICARDO DE ALATANHA / Los Angeles Times

Loree Torrey holds her wedding picture. Her husband died last year.

Sherman Oaks attorney Robert Salley, who represented the trucking company, said he decided to resolve the case for several reasons but declined to go into detail.

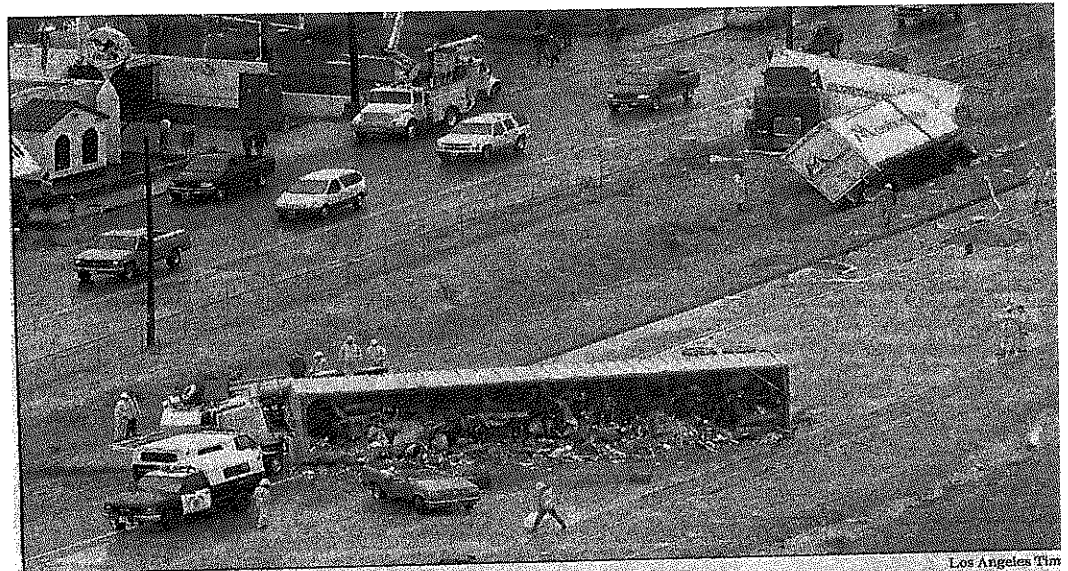
"Any time anybody loses their life, it is tragic," Salley said. "This was a very complex case and we feel comfortable . . . that this is a fair settlement. We obviously wish the Torreys nothing but the best."

Torrey was driving home from work at the Procter & Gamble fac-

ity in Oxnard as Solorio was driving south after dropping off a shipment in San Luis Obispo.

Solorio lost control on the rain-slick freeway just south of Vineyard Avenue in Oxnard, crossed the center divider and smashed into Torrey's pickup. Torrey died at the scene.

"No amount of money can replace the life of a wonderful father and husband," Hiepler said. "However, this is a large settlement."



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Truck at top was involved in March 2000 crash that killed an Ojai man on his way home from work