

## **Lawsuit seeks accountability for deaths**

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The parents of three Troy teens killed by a drunken driver in June 1997 have lectured to high school assemblies, urged lawmakers to tighten drunken-driving laws and established scholarships bearing their children's names.

Now they will have their day in court.

A civil suit filed by the families against the car driver's estate and TGI Friday's is scheduled for trial today in Oakland County Circuit Court, bringing into play a state law that holds bars accountable for drunken-driving deaths.

The families of Ashley Easterbrook, Andrew Stindt and Michael Jamieson contend that Lori Ann Smith had been drinking beer for 2 1/2 hours at TGI Friday's on Crooks Road shortly before she barreled through a red light at the intersection of Crooks and Long Lake and broadsided the Grand Prix carrying the teens.

"TGI Friday's pushed alcohol and sent people out their doors who were a danger to people," said Geoffrey Fieger, who is representing the parents of the three teenagers.

Although Smith's estate is named in the suit, Fieger says TGI Friday's is the target. Smith's family is prepared to settle the case but must be named in the lawsuit against TGI Friday's under state law, Fieger said.

TGI Friday's claims Smith was not in their restaurant on the night of the accident, said Leslie Sharman, senior vice president general counsel for Carlson Restaurants Worldwide, which owns the chain.

The deaths of Easterbrook, 18, and Stindt and Jamieson, both 19, shattered the Troy community. Smith, 33, who was also killed in the crash, left behind an 11-year-old daughter.

The three teens were heading home from a Royal Oak coffee shop just after midnight on June 3, 1997, when Smith struck their car. Smith's blood-alcohol level was later determined to be about 0.15 percent. The level at which someone can be convicted of drunken driving in Michigan is 0.10 percent. Police estimate she was driving more than 75 m.p.h.

Fieger asserts that before Smith got in her car she met John Banach, a coworker at the Northfield Hilton, for drinks at TGI Friday's. After 2 1/2 hours, they left, went to the Super 8 Motel at Maple Road, and then Smith headed home, according to mediation records.

Fieger would not say how much money the families are seeking.

"As much as in the last 3 1/2 years each day seems to get a little better, you always have two things in your mind. Obviously the first is how much we miss our little girl, but also how there's this responsibility," said David Easterbrook, Ashley's father, who is Kmart's divisional vice president of customer service.

"This will give us an opportunity to hold those responsible accountable."

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