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Lawyer for family of woman who died in Ewing gas explosion investigates cause and responsibility

By Nicole Mulvaney/The Times

EWING — To find out what happened before an explosion killed a woman and destroyed part of Ewing's South Fork neighborhood, the victim's family has hired an attorney specializing in natural gas explosions to conduct an independent investigation.

Linda Cerritelli, 62, who was killed by the blast earlier this month, was working from her 28 Crockett Lane condo as a regional office coordinator for Johnson & Johnson when utility workers digging outside hit a gas line on March 4.

She was found dead on top of a car parked near her home after the 12:51 p.m. explosion. Seven utility workers also were injured in the blast, and 55 homes were damaged or destroyed.

Cerritelli's family hired **Tom Kline** of the law firm Kline and Specter, with offices in Cherry Hill and Philadelphia, days after the explosion to investigate what caused the widespread destruction "with an eye towards bringing claim on the parties involved," Kline said.

"We are not just relying on investigations conducted by others," Kline said.

"I hired a team of experts, directing an investigation into the cause and origin and responsibility for the tragic death of a wonderful mother and grandmother," he said. "We are working diligently and thoroughly to make sure we have firsthand knowledge of anything anyone else sees and has access to."

Kline said he won a \$40.5 million settlement in 2004 for the families of six people who died in a Hatboro, Pa., apartment fire after a flood dislodged a gas pipe and led to an explosion, and his law firm won a \$36.4 million settlement in 2003 for the family of Jeffrey Davis of Fairless Hills, Pa., who died in a gas explosion while working as a welder at an oil refinery in Delaware, Kline said.

PSE&G told Ewing Mayor Bert Steinmann that its workers marked the gas lines before contractor Henkels & McCoy began electrical work in the unit next to Cerritelli's, and that the markings were "within the margin of error," which is inside 18 inches of where the lines were located.

The Henkels & McCoy crew believes it struck the 2-inch gas main

more than an hour before 15-foot flames took over the site, officials have said.

Henkels & McCoy immediately called PSE&G, which sent its own workers, but Ewing police confirmed last week neither crew called 9-1-1 when they learned of a possible gas leak.

According to Steinmann, PSE&G workers were testing for gas in Cerritelli's home and the home next door — 26 Crockett Lane — when 26 Crockett exploded.

Police and firefighters in the township first found out about the gas leak when the explosion happened, West Trenton Chief Ralph Brandmaier has said.

"Clearly any lawsuits would involve both PSE&G and Henkels & McCoy," Kline said. "Neither Henkels & McCoy nor PSE&G made any effort to put into effect a rescue, fire, police or evacuation plan. There is not a shred of evidence that 9-1-1 was even called. This all collectively led to this horrible tragedy."

Messages left with representatives of PSE&G and Henkels & McCoy were not returned today.

Raymond E. Mack, an attorney hired by the insurance carrier for the development's condominium

association, also did not respond to phone messages.

Investigators, insurance representatives and others have conducted site excavations and inspections over the past few weeks, tearing apart the ground and attempting to solve the lingering mysteries surrounding the fatal blast.

Kline and his team have been present at all of these visits to assess the ruins, he said.

“I’ve been literally at the remains of the front door of (Cerritelli’s) house and literally have been up next to the vehicle on which she was pinned against and died,” Kline said. “This is all tragic, all avoidable, and in the coming months and years, we will be assessing accountability.”

Cerritelli leaves behind one adult son and two grandchildren, Kline said.

Kline said he is awaiting a final report from the county medical examiner’s office on the exact cause and manner of her death, including the amount of time that passed between her injury and death.

A preliminary report said she suffered extensive burns.

“We expect that the report will show the kinds of injuries you’d expect from a horrible gas explosion, fire, soot and debris,” he said. “I have no doubt that evidence will lead towards showing Linda Cerritelli suffered a terrible and painful death.”

Though no cost estimate has been given for damage to the area, Kline estimates the price tag for replacing and cleaning up the homes is “well into eight figures, above \$10 million,” he said.