

Over \$13 Million Awarded for Death Caused by Fuel Truck Collision

Close-knit family devastated over loss of wife/mother in tragic crash inferno

On February 11, 2005, Gloria Halpern was in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, to assist her mother in caring for her elderly father who was in poor health. Gloria and her aunt went to the airport to pick up Gloria's brother and sister-in-law, who had come into town to help out as well. On the way back from the airport to her parents' home, the vehicle turned onto a ramp leading to the Florida Turnpike. At that same time, Flavio Santisteban, a driver employed by Floval Oil Corporation, drove a tanker truck loaded with approximately 9,000 gallons of fuel into the turn heading onto the ramp. As Mr. Santisteban entered the turn, his rate of speed was too great for the road conditions and he lost control of the truck. The truck crushed Gloria's vehicle against the highway guard rail and a huge fire erupted, engulfing both vehicles. Only one of the occupants was able to escape the inferno (but died from his injuries) and Gloria was burned to death. In a fire so intense that only ashes remained, identification of the victims was difficult.

This horrible, tragic accident brought unbearable grief to a family whose members had, for many years, enjoyed considerable love, attention, and support from each other, and the shared joy of extraordinary individual accomplishments. Gloria's husband, Mel, was devastated. He and Gloria had met at a relatively young age and immediately fell in love. They were married for 36 years. Mel is a lawyer, working as a senior technical assistant for the United States Court of Appeals. After graduating from Brooklyn College, City University of New York, with a bachelor of arts degree, Gloria went on to George Washington University, Washington, DC, to earn her masters degree in education. In 1981, she became a certified public accountant. She began work as a teacher in the Department of Business and Economics at Montgomery College in Maryland, and ran her own accounting business involving tax return preparation.

Mel and Gloria devoted their lives to each other, and to their two children, Jeff and Jennifer. Jeff had a passion for hockey and the Halpern family's early life revolved around sports and traveling. After graduating from Princeton University, Jeff signed a contract to play professionally for the Washington Capitals. His parents were thrilled



Approaching a turnpike on-ramp at a high speed, the driver of a tanker truck loaded with fuel lost control of the vehicle and crushed a car into the guardrail. A huge fire erupted and all occupants in the car were killed. Gloria Halpern, who was in Florida to help care for her ailing and elderly father, was killed in the accident. In a brief and terrible moment, Gloria's husband and two children lost the central person in their family life, and lost their dreams of sharing with her a wonderful and loving life with a soon-to-be-born first grandchild.

because he would be playing a sport he loved and would remain in the Maryland area near them.

Jennifer also graduated from Princeton University, and then went on to Vanderbilt Medical School, graduating in 1999. Following her residency, she began work as an orthopedic surgeon. Months before Gloria's tragic and unexpected death, Jennifer found out that she was pregnant. The whole family was thrilled about the pregnancy and even happier when they found that the first grandchild would be a baby girl. Gloria planned on being with her daughter for the birth, and staying for several months afterwards to help Jennifer and her husband with the new baby.

Prior to that tragic day in 2005, the Halpern family had enjoyed a wonderful and loving life, together and individually. Mel and Gloria had always preferred being with each other and with their children rather than pursuing outside interests. The couple had just begun to think about retirement and the pleasures of spending day after day with each other for the rest of their lives. Now Mel is trying to figure out how he is going to continue on without Gloria by his side. When Jennifer's baby was born, the exciting, happy moment was muted by the family's grief and sadness that Gloria was not there to spend time with her new granddaughter.

Mel Halpern asked SDSBS attorneys **Chris Searcy** and **John Shipley** to represent him in an action against Floval Oil Corporation. The case was arbitrated in December 2008, resulting in an award of \$13 million for Gloria's husband, Mel, and \$500,000 each for their two adult children. ■