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Marcos Breton: Sacramento lawyers know how to beat insurers

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They win personal injury judgments so big, even trial lawyer allies blush. You may not know Robert Buccola and his partners at their Sacramento law firm by name, but you know their work.

On Friday, Buccola and Steven M. Campora secured a \$24 million judgment – the largest personal injury award in Sacramento County history – for a young girl whose father accidentally ran her over in his big rig, leaving her severely disfigured and disabled.

Buccola also represented the mother and daughter who were awarded an undisclosed sum by PG&E in the aftermath of a Rancho Cordova natural gas explosion on Christmas Eve 2008.

Last October, another partner, Roger Dreyer, won \$16.6 million in damages for the family of Jennifer Lea Strange, the Sacramento woman who died of water intoxication in a water drinking contest staged by KDND "The End" (107.9 FM).

The big cases – and big payouts – go on and on. Why? Because since 1987, Buccola and his partners at Dreyer Babich Buccola Callaham & Wood have been better, smarter and more passionate than the insurance industry lawyers they go up against.

Whatever you might think about the \$24 million judgment awarded to 14-year-old Diana Yuleidy Loza-Jimenez, the fact is Buccola and Campora found an angle and exploited it.

Six years ago, Loza-Jimenez joined her father, mother and other family members on a long-haul trip from Oregon to Bakersfield, where they visited relatives and picked up produce to bring back to Oregon. On the return trip, they stopped for a break near Mount Shasta. The father got back in the big rig and pulled away, not realizing his daughter was still outside. She was crushed beneath the rear wheels.

So why was Freeway Transport Inc. – the Portland company that hired the dad – on the hook for the injuries instead of him?

Because Campora learned every arcane facet of the laws regulating trucking. The company profited from being a common carrier of goods across state lines. Since it benefited from the produce run, the argument went, it also was liable for injuries that occurred during shipment of its products.

Moreover, the lawyers for Freeway Transport chose not to settle. They pushed to separate the liability phase from the damages.

Bad call. Once Buccola and Campora established liability, the role of the father was not really a factor.

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"My wife is sending me all these comments that people are saying about this case," Campora said. "These people don't know the facts of the case or how the law applies. There is nothing novel about this case. It's existing law applied to the facts."

And what of Diana Yuleidy Loza-Jimenez? The accident peeled skin and muscle from her bones. She will endure at least 19 more surgeries. The \$24 million will pay for what Buccola calls "a lifetime of pain."

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