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Jury awards \$7.2 million to family of bus driver

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John Haen was driving Sierra Pines Church bus when he was killed in Highway 99 accident

By [Tiffany Tuell](#)

It's been more than two years since Coarsegold resident John Haen, 40, was struck and killed by a big rig beside Highway 99 in the Merced area.

Last Thursday, after a three-week trial and three days of jury deliberation in Fresno County Superior Court before Judge Donald Black, Haen's family was awarded \$7.2 million for pain and suffering in the wrongful death civil case against two trucking companies.

Haen left behind his wife, Sheryll, and two children.

The jury awarded \$6.7 million to Haen's family and \$514,000 to Haen's nephew, Bodie Young, who was on the bus when Haen was killed.

Young's attorney, Charles M. Barrett, told the jury he (Young) still suffers from depression and post traumatic stress disorder from seeing his uncle killed.

"This was a wonderful family," said the Haen family's lawyer, Roger Dreyer. "All death cases are tragic but this one particularly. Not only did the family lose John Haen but the community lost him. This is a guy driving kids to San Francisco to do God's work at a mission... that exemplifies who he was and we all suffer his loss, especially the Sierra community."

Haen was very involved in his church, Sierra Pines, and was driving the church's bus full of volunteers home after a three-day mission trip to San Francisco's Tenderloin District when he was killed April 17, 2009.

When the the bus ran out of gas and was pulled to the side of Highway 99, Haen and another church volunteer walked to Merced to get gas. A California Highway Patrol officer drove them back to the bus. While Haen was on the shoulder of the road, the trailer of one big rigs hit the tractor of another while trying to pass. This caused the trailer of one of the rigs to hit Haen, the bus and the CHP vehicle. Haen was thrown about 70 feet upon impact and died instantly at the scene.

Before the verdict was read, Dreyer said he hoped the jury would find the appropriate parties accountable and send an important message to trucking companies -- that drivers need to be trained and monitored and should not speed or drive inattentively. The big rigs were owned by Logos Group and Triple E Produce.

"When companies don't do their job, they put us all at a risk," Dreyer said. "The family is hoping the industry takes note of this verdict and institutes practices so this doesn't happen to other families."

Dreyer said both the drivers were inattentive in their operation and one driver was driving over the speed limit.

"If either one had been paying attention, Mr. Haen would still be alive."

During the trial, Sheryll's background came to the forefront when it was learned she was a survivor of the Chowchilla busnapping.

On July 15, 1976 brothers Richard and James Schoenfeld and Frederick Woods hijacked and kidnapped a school bus with 26 children aboard and their driver at gunpoint. They then loaded the children and the driver into vans, driving them around for hours until the children became disoriented, then forced them into a moving van buried underground in a Livermore quarry. The kidnappers left and were planning on calling for ransom, but all 27 escaped 16 hours later.

The kidnappers were arrested and convicted and are serving life sentences.

Dreyer said Sheryll had been through a lot in her life and Haen's influence in helping his wife overcome her past was exceptional including getting his bus driving license so she could feel comfortable getting on a bus again.

Dreyer said the loss of her husband was cataclysmic for Sheryll and that is why her background was important to the case.

Sheryll Haen and her two children were not on the bus at the time of the accident.

"The Oakhurst community knows John Haen and that they have lost someone special," Dreyer said. "I go all over the state for trucking incidents and this was a remarkable man."