



PHOTOS: JEBB HARRIS, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

COPING: Craig Daniel, at the microphones, looks at his wife, Carol Daniel, as lawyer Daniel Callahan tells how the family is managing since the accident. In the background are Chris Neria and his wife, Stacy Neria, who also was severely injured.

Injured joggers turn a page

Multimillion-dollar settlement means both women can now focus on their therapy.

By **ANDREW GOOD**
THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

So that his wife, Stacy, can drink, Chris Neria holds a bottle of water up to her lips. He does her hair, nails and makeup; getting ready in the morning can begin at 7 a.m. and take until noon on some days. Then, it's off to physical or speech therapy. It's the same for Craig Daniel, who's become a "regular nurse" for his wife, Carol.

Both men have quit their jobs to become full-time caretakers for their wives. For both San Clemente families, the nearly \$50 million settlement awarded to them Tuesday by the city of Dana Point was bittersweet at best.

"I feel like it's a small consolation considering what we've gone through up until now and will continue to go through," said Chris Neria at a news conference Wednesday. After attorneys fees, the money will help pay for physical therapy and medical bills he called outrageous. "People don't realize how much insurance doesn't cover." Daniel, 42, and Neria, 35, were left quadriplegic



Stacy Neria

"She misses being the wife and mom she was and always wanted to be."

CHRIS NERIA
ABOUT HIS WIFE, STACY

after being struck by a driver April 8, 2006, while jogging in a bike lane on Pacific Coast Highway.

The settlement in the personal injury case is the highest ever reported in California, according to Todd A. Wolfe of Trials Digest, a Thomson/West business, a leading publisher of nationwide verdicts and settlements in San Francisco. Wolfe scanned a database of 32,000 California verdicts and settlements.

The driver, who was on probation for DUI at the time, probably deserved "the lion's share" of the blame, said lawyer Daniel Callahan of Callahan & Blaine, a Santa Ana firm that represented the women.

But Callahan said it was the city's fault for not maintaining its roadway, which he said had an unmarked bike lane that can confuse drivers and look like an extra car lane.

The city has maintained the roadway was not a factor in the crash.

"Rather than go to trial and find out what the jury thinks about that, the (city's) insurance com-

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pany has agreed to settle the case," City Attorney Patrick Munoz said in a previous interview. "It's a compromise."

The city erected a barrier for a bike lane on the other side of the street from where the joggers were injured. On the day they were to go to trial, the city offered close to \$50 million. Callahan said the settlement is being paid by four insurance companies representing Dana Point, and not with taxpayer money.

Several comments on www.ocregister.com have been negative, accusing the women of being partially responsible for the accident by running in the bike lane with two friends in the first place. Those comments are nothing new, Craig Daniel said; they've been around since news of the lawsuit broke. At first he even responded to a few of them, but he said eventually it becomes too much.

"You turn it off and say 'Forget it,'" Daniel said. "It hurts. You second-guess yourself and what you're doing. ... Imagine for all the other people out there where something tragic happens and someone says something really nasty. It hap-

pens all the time."

For now, Carol and Stacy are just concerned with making progress through physical therapy and moving forward day by day. Both use motorized wheelchairs operated by their faces. Stacy can speak in a hoarse whisper - remarkable progress considering where she started, she told her husband, who spoke to reporters for her. When she woke up after the accident, she could only blink, and it was six months before she could swallow water. Now she's able to smile as well as talk.

"She misses being the wife and mom she was and always wanted to be," Chris told reporters. Stacy let out a sob upon hearing that.

Craig Daniel said his children initially went through a rough time adjusting to the accident, though undergoing therapy has helped. Both he and Carol were relieved they didn't have to go through a trial.

When asked whether the settlement fees would ease their pain at all, he said "I hope so. We haven't felt (any relief) yet."

Staff writer Vik Jolly contributed to this report.



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ROUND-THE-CLOCK CARE: Chris Neria gives his wife, Stacy, a sip of water before a news conference detailing the nearly \$50 million settlement resulting from her injury.