

## Paralyzed Stuyvesant H.S. student sues Ford, city for \$300 million

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The family of a Stuyvesant High School student paralyzed on a field trip in a van crash is suing Ford, the city, the Education Department and others for \$300 million.

Valerie Piro, speaking publicly yesterday for the first time since the Jan. 12 accident, was paralyzed from the chest down after her team's van flipped while traveling to a track meet at Dartmouth.

"Some days I feel great and other days I feel like, this sucks so much," the brave 17-year-old said yesterday. Though Valerie remains optimistic about her recovery, the rehabilitation has been long and expensive — and her injuries could be permanent.

The lawsuit, filed in Manhattan Supreme Court, alleges that Valerie's coach, Erin Taylor, was negligent when the van she was driving veered off the road and rolled over in Hartford, Vt.

Though she was wearing a seat belt, Valerie was ejected and suffered a spinal cord injury. She has been out of school since. Her lawyers say the 13-passenger Ford van was dangerous and lacked side air bags that might have prevented Valerie from being thrown. They also allege Avis should not have rented the van because of these dangers.

"Val should be, on this beautiful summer day, enjoying the rest of this summer," said attorney Fred Eisenberg. "Instead, she's faced with a

devastating spinal cord injury."

Despite the hardships, Valerie scored an impressive 2230 on her SATS and completed Advanced Placement math, history and English courses so that she can start her senior year at Stuyvesant next month.

She devotes several hours a day to her recovery — "a bit longer than a regular track practice," she said. This includes being hooked up to a bicycle and another machine that pumps electric stimulation into different muscle groups.

"You find out who really cares about you, who your friends are and you realize how amazing your family is for sticking with you though this crappy time," Valerie said.

She is now convalescing at home after spending months at the Rusk Institute for Rehabilitation - where she was visited by Olympian Alison Felix - and the Kennedy Krieger Institute in Baltimore.

Valerie remained upbeat during the press conference, joking and smiling but cringing when a photo of the accident was displayed.

This month she's particularly sad because all of her teammates will be headed to the Wingfoot Cross Country Camp in Copiague. Valerie said she loved getting up early in the morning to work out.

"It's the week I look forward to most in the summer," she said. "I can't go this year. They're going to have fun without me."

Her lawyers blame the city and Education Department for not properly supervising Taylor, who told her boss about the trip and collected parental consent forms, but did not receive official approval.

A spokeswoman from the city's Law Department said, "This involves a very tragic matter and we'll review the legal papers thoroughly."

A Ford official said the company is investigating the incident.

"Our sympathy goes out to victims of this tragic accident. The Ford E-350 is proven to be a very safe vehicle when operated properly."

Another student fractured a bone in her neck in the crash but has recovered and returned to school. Taylor, who had been training for the Olympics in China, also fractured a neck bone. She has recovered but could not compete in Beijing.

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