

# Boy is injured by lap belt in car accident

*GM agreed to settle the case that left Justin Miller paralyzed*

Justin Miller was 14 when he was a passenger in a car involved in a head-on collision. His mother, who had been driving, was killed in the accident. But other passengers in the 1984 Chevrolet Cavalier, including one in the rear seat who did not wear a seat belt, were not seriously hurt. Justin, who was wearing a lap-belt, was left paralyzed from the waist down.

His lawyer, Shanin Specter, argued at a trial held in 2001 – six years after the mishap – that General Motors knew the lap belts to be dangerous yet offered its better three-point belts only as an option in its 1984 models (while non-essential items, such as cigarette lighters, were standard equipment).

GM offered a settlement, but Specter felt it was insufficient and suggested the offer be rejected. But Justin, who was without a job and without his parents (his father was usually on the road driving a truck), felt he had no choice but to accept. As the jury entered its second day of deliberations, Justin, growing more nervous by the hour, insisted on taking the offer. Specter got Ford to raise its offer before reluctantly accepting. After the jury was dismissed, its members indicated they had been leaning toward a substantial award against GM, much more than Justin got.

On Feb. 5, 2003, a year and two days after Justin actually got his settlement check, he was found dead in his bedroom in his uncle's house. The cause was ruled to be an accidental overdose of pain killers.