

By Paul Peirce
Tue. Nov. 20, 2012

PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW™

EMT recounts feeling of helplessness after utility line fell on Hempfield woman

Emergency crews could not help a Hempfield woman as she “writhed in pain” beneath a live, 7,200-volt power line for more than 20 minutes until West Penn Power Co. crews arrived to cut power and pull the line off her, a paramedic told an Allegheny County jury on Monday.

Walter Lipinski, a former paramedic with Sewickley Ambulance, testified that local firefighters and paramedics were not equipped to cut power or pull away the line after it fell onto Carrie Goretzka, 39, outside her West Hempfield Drive home on the afternoon of June 2, 2009.

“(Goretzka) would occasionally holler in pain. Once in a while, you could see actual sparks coming up from her body,” Lipinski told jurors.

Lipinski, who manages pre-hospital services for Excelsa Health, testified in the third day of a trial for a wrongful death lawsuit that Goretzka’s family, including her husband, Michael, and young daughters, Chloe and Carlie, filed against the utility company. The Goretzkas claim that power company crewmen did not properly clean the line before it was installed, causing it to corrode and fall onto Carrie Goretzka.

She died three days later in UPMC Mercy in Pittsburgh.

Lipinski testified that he was told by Adamsburg Fire Chief Don Thoma that it was too dangerous to approach Goretzka when he arrived about 4:40 p.m., about seven minutes after paramedics were dispatched. He and other crewmen then planned a “course of action how we would remove the victim once the scene was rendered safe.”

Goretzka’s mother-in-law, Joann Goretzka, had tried to pull Carrie to safety and burned her hands, according to testimony. The accident occurred in view of the Goretzkas’ two children, then age 3 and 5.

Another Adamsburg firefighter, Timothy Harper, who like Thoma lives near the Goretzkas, testified about the delay in being able to approach his neighbor. Jurors watched taped testimony from Harper, who is serving in the Air Force Reserve.

Harper said the power on his computer in his home on Stratford Drive failed twice in a matter of minutes that afternoon. He heard screaming and “saw Carrie laying on the ground.”

“I remember her kids and mother were on the front porch. The fire chief, Don Thoma, pulled up, and I told him that she’s wrapped three times in the wire ... there’s not much we can do right now,” Harper said.

A nearby pine tree caught fire, Harper said.

Lipinski told jurors under questioning by the Goretzka's attorney, **Shanin Specter**, that when he was able to approach Carrie Goretzka about 4:50 p.m., she drifted in and out of consciousness. He confirmed written reports that described "80 percent" of her body had second- and third-degree burns, and most of her clothes had been burned off.

"Did you see any evidence that she had been crying?" Specter asked.

"Yes," Lipinski replied.

Lipinski told jurors he did not think she would survive such serious injuries.

"I believed her injuries were terminal. We saw a lot of external burn (injuries), but with those type of (electrocution) injuries, there is a lot of internal damage," he said.

Lipinski said after crews took Carrie Goretzka to a medical helicopter that landed at nearby West Hempfield Elementary School, he noticed Michael Goretzka standing outside the ambulance.

"He was crying and very emotional. I took him to the side and told him it would be a long, hard road if she was able to survive. ... You'll have to be there to help her," Lipinski said.

Dr. Larry Jones, director of The Ohio State University Burn Center, described photographs of Carrie Goretzka's injuries. He noted that her left arm was so severely burned that it had to be amputated at the shoulder joint.

He testified that "80 to 90 percent" of her body was burned.

"She died of multiple organ system failure that was secondary to the burn (injuries)," said Jones, the former head of burn surgery at UPMC Mercy.

Pittsburgh psychologist Dr. Stephen Schachner told jurors that Michael Goretzka and his mother suffer post-traumatic stress disorder and "major depression."

His examinations indicate that Michael Goretzka has had a life history of "tremendous" strength "to grin and bear it" during adversity. However, the loss of his wife is different, Schachner testified.

"He's constantly worried about the well-being of his young daughters living without their mother and the well-being of his mother," he said.

Schachner said both Goretzka children still are affected by their mother's death. He said both suffer separation anxiety and have slept every night in the same room as their father.

"It demonstrates a level of anxiety and lack of safety assurance outside the family," he said.

The trial resumes Tuesday morning before Judge Michael A. Della Vecchia.