

\$5,000 award given to Lawrence Fire Department in honor of teen killed in gas explosions

By Nick Stoico Globe Correspondent, Updated September 13, 2020, 7:25 p.m.



From left: Lawrence Mayor Daniel Rivera, Lawrence Fire Department Chief Brian Moriarty, attorney Douglas Sheff, and Lucianny Rondon, sister of Leonel Rondon, at the presentation of The Leonel Rondon Memorial Award for Fire and Explosion Prevention, which came with a \$5,000 check presented by Sheff Law. JOSH REYNOLDS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Leonel Rondon was 18 when gas explosions rocked three communities in the Merrimack Valley on Sept. 13, 2018, including his home city of Lawrence. Rondon was sitting in a car on Chickering Road when the blasts toppled a chimney, killing the Phoenix Charter Academy student.

The blasts injured dozens in Lawrence, Andover, and North Andover and damaged more than 100 homes and buildings, but the Rondons were the only family grieving a life lost too soon.

One year after the explosions, Lawrence officials dedicated a city square to Rondon. On Sunday, which was the second anniversary of the deadly incident, another ceremony was held in Rondon's memory — this time with a gift for the Lawrence Fire Department.

Rondon's family and Doug Sheff, the family's lawyer, presented a \$5,000 check to Lawrence Fire Chief Brian Moriarty and a plaque with Rondon's picture to be hung in the fire station. It was the first of what Sheff said will be an annual ceremony to present the Leonel Rondon Memorial Award.

“It’s very humbling and an honor to think that in the Rondon family’s worst hour and time of their life, they reach back and think of us to help us possibly rescue someone else in the future,” Moriarty said. “We don’t expect people to give back. This is an honorable gift.”

The money was donated by Sheff, who said his firm “wanted to recognize those who prevent fires and explosions.”

Rondon’s sister, Lucianny, stood alongside Sheff, Moriarty, and Lawrence Mayor Dan Rivera as the award was presented outside the Lawrence Fire Department headquarters.

Lucianny said she misses her brother every day.

“Every day is a challenge, every day is difficult because we cannot hear his voice, his jokes, his laughter,” she told reporters at the station, according to a WCVB newscast segment. “Knowing that he is not going to come home, it’s difficult.”

Sheff said emotions are still raw in the close-knit family as they continue to reel from their loss.

“It doesn’t matter how much time has passed,” he said. “Times are tough and they’re happy something good can come out of this.”

He also said the award would help keep Rondon’s memory alive.

“We want people to remember five years from now when we’re still giving this out not to forget what happened here,” he said. “This is one of the most significant cases of our time, because wherever you are, those pipelines are under us.”

The family reached a confidential settlement with Columbia Gas in a wrongful death lawsuit last year.

In July, Columbia Gas agreed to pay \$56 million to resolve the state’s investigation into the explosions. Additionally, Eversource will purchase the company from Indiana-based NiSource Inc. for \$1.1 billion. The deal is expected to close later this fall.

In April last year, US Senator Edward Markey and Representative Lori Trahan introduced a bill in Rondon’s name that officials said would strengthen pipeline safety precautions.

The Leonel Rondon Pipeline Safety Act, which Markey’s camp has said would close regulatory loopholes and increase safety standards, was included in the Senate-passed PIPES Act in August.

For Moriarty, the fire chief, the two years since the explosions have passed quickly, but he took a moment to reflect on Sunday.

“We’re humbled [the family] thought of us, and we accept it on behalf of Andover and North Andover firefighters and first responders who responded that day and in the following months,” he said.