

\$26M Deal Reached In Exploding Pressure Cooker Suit

By Emily Field, Editing by Peter Rozovsky

The law firm representing a girl injured by an exploding pressure cooker on Tuesday said that it had reached a \$26 million settlement with Lifetime Brands to end claims in Florida state court that the company hid a faulty lock that caused the girl's burns and multiple amputations.

John Uustal of Kelley/Uustal PLC told Law360 on that Samantha Gonzalez, now 5 years old, had been badly burned three years before by the contents of a Vasconia brand eight-quart pressure cooker that had a defective lock mechanism that allowed it to open while under pressure. A Florida circuit court judge in Broward County entered an order approving the settlement on Nov. 12, according to Uustal.

Samantha developed sepsis while she was hospitalized for her burns, which resulted in the amputation of her left leg, most of her right foot, her left hand and all the fingers on her right hand, Uustal said.

Uustal told Law360 that the company had realized there was

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a problem with the pressure cooker and changed the part without informing the public or the Consumer Product Safety Commission, which made it difficult to figure out what the problem was.

“All the pressure cookers we were testing didn't have a defect. In fact we had hired several experts who weren't able to do it,” Uustal said. “We were just lucky enough to have found some old pressure cookers on eBay that did have the problem, and once we realized that we realized our pressure cooker had the problem.”

Kitchenware provider Lifetime Brands decided to start selling pressure cookers in the mid-2000s, according to court filings, believing there was a large financial opportunity to sell pressure cookers to Latin Americans in the U.S.

The company knew of a Mexican brand, Vasconia, that Latin Americans considered reliable, but after deciding that importing the Mexican pressure cookers was too expensive, it

decided to sell Chinese-made ones under the Vasconia brand name, according to court filings.

The only thing that Lifetime did to screen the pressure cooker's safety was to choose a model with a mark from Underwriter Laboratories, a safety consulting and certification company, according to court filings. But that mark was fraudulent, according to court filings.

United Laboratories had tested a series of pressure cookers made by Yuyao Municipal Three Stars Kitchen Appliance Co. Ltd. in 2002 and certified them as compliant, according to court filings. But Lifetime chose a pressure cooker from another series with the United Laboratories mark and never asked for safety test data or reports, according to court filings.

Lifetime also asked for the cooker, which came in a metric size, to be changed to an eight-quart size for the U.S. market, according to filings.

But in making this change, a part in the cooker's lid locking mechanism, a locking bar, was also altered so that it was the wrong size, which allowed the lid to twist and open when the cooker was still under pressure, according to court documents.

Underwriter Laboratories safety standards requires that a pressure cooker's lid cannot be removed while under pressure,

according to court documents.

Uustal said that the firm reported the defect to the CPSC in July.

Representatives for Lifetime Brands did not immediately respond to requests for comment on Tuesday.

Gonzalez is represented by John Uustal, Michael Hersh and Catherine Darlson of Kelley/Uustal PLC.

The case is S. E.G. minor by and through her parents v. Lifetime Brands Inc., case number 16-016685 in the Circuit Court of the Seventeenth Judicial Circuit in and for Broward County, Florida. ■