

Family Gets \$8 Million in Bus Death

■ **Courts:** Jury finds Mark IV Charter responsible in accident that killed teacher Sara Quezada at L.A. Zoo in 1994.

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A Los Angeles Superior Court jury awarded \$8.15 million Thursday to the family of an East Los Angeles teacher who was killed nearly two years ago while shielding a student from a runaway bus at the Los Angeles Zoo.

After deliberating three days, the jury found Culver City-based Mark IV Charter liable for \$400,000 in economic damages and \$7.75 million in punitive damages, making it one of the largest wrongful death awards in the state, family attorneys said.

The family of Sara Quezada also filed the wrongful death suit against bus manufacturer Motor Coach Industries, which was not found liable, and bus driver Sergio Blanco, who was dismissed as a defendant earlier in the civil trial.

Quezada's family said they hoped that the lawsuit would draw attention to bus safety standards and pressure companies to conduct more driver training.

"This was a needless accident, and we just hope that something like that never happens again," said Jose Quezada, the victim's eldest son. "I hope that the trial will affect all bus drivers and bus companies to make sure that drivers are not negligent."

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FAMILY

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After the verdict was read, Jose Quezada and his father, Armando, quietly thanked the jurors in the courthouse hallway.

"Even though we won a verdict, there's a realization of the fact that we lost our mother permanently," said Jose Quezada, 27, a substitute teacher. "It sends a message to the bus company, but we're still left with the pain."

On June 24, 1994, Sara Quezada, a teacher and supervisor at Jardin de Ninos preschool in Lincoln Heights, was crushed to death as she helped children board the chartered bus after a field trip to the zoo.

Clayton Jose Keith, then 3, was climbing into the bus when the 18-ton vehicle began rolling downhill. Quezada grabbed Keith as he fell, held him in her arms and pushed him away from the wheels.

Other students bolted in fear as the bus pulled Quezada and Keith underneath. Keith suffered a broken pelvis, but Quezada, 50, was killed instantly.

Quezada was heralded as a hero by local and state officials after her death. Her family received letters of commendation from Los Angeles Mayor Richard Riordan, Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.) and Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.), among others.

"If she had the opportunity to do it again, I know she wouldn't have wanted it any other way," said her son Cesar Quezada, 24, a kindergarten teacher. "My mother was always a person who was looking after everybody, she always put herself second. She always made sure everybody was safe, including our family and her students."

Quezada, who came to Los Angeles from Mexico City in 1969, is survived by her husband and three

children. The family moved to El Sereno in 1987 after living in Bell for many years.

Browne Greene, lead attorney for the Quezada family, said a lack of bus driver training led to the tragedy. Blanco, 25, testified that he did not receive training on the type of bus that he was operating that day.

The bus was parked on a downward slope at the time of the accident as Blanco stood outside loading the storage compartments. Blanco said that although he left the bus running and forgot to turn the wheels toward the curb, he had set the parking brake before he got out.

"Mark IV is one of the biggest bus operators . . . they transport thousands of children a day, and they're going to have to take some real deliberate safety standards now," Greene said. "This case is going to have a nationwide effect in enforcing training and safety standards on buses."

Marc Feldman, attorney for the bus company, said: "The jury has spoken. We live in a civilized society, we accept the jury verdict. We will now evaluate issues of appeal."

Defense attorneys for the bus company argued during the trial

that someone had released the emergency brake, and that a flaw in the bus design that left the brake exposed was partly responsible for the accident.

Greene said a teacher standing by the empty driver's seat as the students boarded testified that no one touched the brake. There was no evidence that the parking brake was ever set, he added. The jury found no liability on the part of the bus manufacturer, Motor Coach Industries, which the bus company contended was negligent because of the vehicle's design.

Listening to the details of the accident has reopened old wounds, said daughter Sara Quezada, 30, a teacher at Belvedere Junior High.

"When I think of her not being here, I try not to think about the accident. I just think of all the good memories. . . . I try not to remember how she died," Cesar Quezada said. "And so that's why this whole trial was kind of hard, because it brought back all the details, everything came up again."

All her children became bilingual schoolteachers in East Los Angeles, and credit their mother's influence for pushing them toward education.