

Carbon monoxide poisoning at Leonard's spurs suit

BY ANN GIVENS

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Patricia Murphy was celebrating her Irish heritage at a dinner-dance when the ballroom began to swim.

"You're wasted," her nephew teased. But Murphy had almost nothing to drink that night in March.

Within about an hour, Murphy, 53, of Mineola, who has had several brain surgeries because of a rare medical condition, couldn't stand or speak. Relatives carried her from Leonard's of Great Neck catering hall and took her home -- not realizing then that she and others were poisoned by carbon monoxide.

A carbon monoxide leak at Leonard's had sent about two dozen guests to the hospital with symptoms ranging from severe headaches to vomiting and dizziness. Patricia Murphy and her mother, Nora, recently became the first people to sue Leonard's, seeking unspecified damages because they say the facility caused the leak by blocking a boiler vent, then failed to act quickly to protect its customers.

"I thought she was going to die," said Nora Murphy, tearfully remembering the night. It was not until the following morning that Patricia Murphy learned she was not the only one who'd fallen ill the night before.

Patricia Murphy said she is not as concerned about winning a financial settlement as she is about making Leonard's, and other businesses like it, aware of the need for carbon monoxide detectors.

"If you're supposed to have one in your private residence, shouldn't you have one in a public place where you expect to be safe?" asked Patricia Murphy.

Ernest Langstrand, director of operations at Leonard's, said he was not aware of the lawsuit. But he said the facility took immediate action after the leak.

"We have taken every precautionary measure and every step possible to insure that this could never happen again," including installing carbon monoxide detectors throughout the building, Langstrand said.

Attorney Dan Flanzig, who along with his sister Cathy Flanzig is representing the Murphys, said it shouldn't have taken this kind of disaster for Leonard's to make that change.

"It's just good practice ... to have a carbon monoxide detector," said Flanzig, of Mineola.

The Murphys had gone to Leonard's for the annual dinner of the Sligo Association -- an organization of people whose ancestors hale from Sligo County in Ireland. Patricia's cousin was accepting the group's Woman of the Year award -- and Patricia said she stayed long after she started feeling ill so she wouldn't ruin her cousin's big night.

The next day, Patricia said she learned there were many other people who felt ill and didn't speak up either. Nora Murphy said she got up to dance and her legs gave way, something that at the time she attributed to aging. A 7-year-old child at the party fell asleep in a chair -- and Patricia now says that if the fire department hadn't evacuated the facility, she fears the child might have been in grave danger.

But it is Patricia Murphy who has suffered the most lasting consequences, Flanzig said. She suffers from a Chiari Malformation, a neurological disorder where the bottom of the brain descends from the skull and crowds the spinal cord. Since the poisoning, she says the right side of her body, from her hand to her foot, has gotten far weaker.

"You go to a place like that and you expect to have a good time," Patricia Murphy said. "But this really put a damper on it."
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