

Suit filed in crash that left Stratford man paralyzed

Written by John Kovach

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A 23-year-old Stratford man, permanently paralyzed as a result of a Route 8 accident in September 2009, Friday filed suit against The Lakehouse Bar & Grill in Seymour.

Attorneys for Alex Convertito said the Lakehouse Bar & Grill served the alcoholic beverages to the man who crashed his car into Convertito.

Also Friday, William Reppenhagen, 56, of Paugusett Circle, Trumbull, is expected to be sentenced under a plea agreement to three years in prison for drunken driving and causing the accident that left Convertito permanently paralyzed from the waist down.

At the time of the crash, police said Reppenhagen had a blood-alcohol level more than twice the legal limit, and evidence showed that in the seconds before the collision he was driving at more than 100 miles per hour, according to Convertito's attorneys.

Sentencing is scheduled to take place Friday at Bridgeport Superior Court at 2 p.m.

"A customer of a bar doesn't reach a high blood alcohol level by happenstance or after one or two drinks," said Convertito's attorney, William Bloss of the Bridgeport-based law firm Koskoff, Koskoff & Bieder. "Any establishment serving alcohol is well aware of its legal responsibility — and liability — if its employees continue to serve someone who is a lethal threat to others."

The suit was filed in Bridgeport Superior Court. In addition to The Lakehouse Bar & Grill, the suit also names Michele Zurko-Smith, the bar's permittee, as a defendant in the case.

According to police, Convertito was on Route 8 in Trumbull, on his way to a friend's house after work at the Shelton Super Stop & Shop, when a sedan driven by Reppenhagen struck him from behind at a high speed. The impact caused Convertito's car to spin across the highway, up an embankment and into trees, where it landed on its roof. Convertito was ejected from the car.

In November, Convertito was flown to Atlanta for specialized treatment at the Shepherd Center, nationally known for its work with severe spinal cord injuries. He also suffered several broken ribs in the crash, as well as lung damage and numerous other injuries. He is expected to require additional surgery and long-term medical care.

"Alex is going to need hundreds of thousands of dollars of medical treatment," Bloss said. "Because of his injuries, Alex will never be able to return to the activities he enjoyed. As you can imagine, this has been completely devastating for his entire family."

Two funds have been set up to help cover Convertito's medical expenses, nearly all of which are not covered by insurance. Contributions to the Alex Convertito Donations Account can be made at any branch office of People's United Bank.

Contributions can also be made to a charity set up by Fletcher Thompson Inc., where Convertito's father is employed. Donations can be mailed to Fletcher Thompson Health and Family Services, 3 Corporate Drive, Suite 500, Shelton CT 06494, with a note indicating the funds are for Alex Convertito.