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Legal Team Uses Google Street View Photos to Secure \$4M Settlement

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A TEAM OF PLAINTIFFS ATTORNEYS said they used Google Street View photographs to secure a \$4 million settlement for a client who was paralyzed after falling from a billboard where he was working.

Without the series of Google pictures, the attorneys said they would not have been able to prove that a maintenance contractor had altered the billboard's ladder during refurbishing, shortening it and removing some pieces.

Jeffrey Vance of Carroll County fell when the ladder broke off of a billboard on Chattahoochee Avenue in Fulton County where he was working on July 31, 2013, according to a lawsuit he filed in Putnam County State Court against the owner of the sign and lessor of the land. But he dismissed that lawsuit after his attorneys found the Google photos showed changes to the ladder after Wilson Sign Inc. executed a work order for refurbishing.

"We could find no design plans or original photos of the billboard taken by the owner or anyone else," said plaintiff's attorney Matthew

Cook. "Fortunately, though, we were able to find pictures of the billboard and ladder on Google Earth's Street View. The Google Earth photos documented in chronological order the condition of the billboard in its intact state, and then showed the ladder after it had been cut off by the third-party vendor. Once we had that, we were able to put together a very, very tight demand letter that they just had to deal with."

Auto Owners Insurance Co. responded with the policy limits within the scope of the time-limited demand, according to Cook. He worked the case with his partner and wife, Kate Cook, of Cook Law Group in Gainesville, and the father-and-son team of Thomas and Jon Greer, along with their partner, Erica Tisinger, of Greer Tisinger in Carrollton.

"The photographic evidence was absolutely key to the case," said Cook. "The abundance of cameras in our society has really changed the practice of law."

G. Lee Welborn of Downey & Cleveland in Marietta handled the case for Auto Owners. Welborn said he couldn't comment on the settlement.



L-R Kate and Matt Cook

On the day of the fall, Vance, then 29, was wrapping the billboard with an advertising poster for his employer, CBS Outdoors, "a job he had done hundreds of times before," Cook said. As he moved from the front to the back, he stepped on an access ladder, which suddenly swung forward and broke loose from the sign. He fell 30 feet.

Cook and Greer said Vance spent several months in treatment at Shepherd Center in Atlanta, a specialty hospital for spinal cord and brain injury rehabilitation. His wife and two children celebrated his 30th birthday with him there. They said he has worked hard to recover. Although he is in a wheelchair, Cook and Jon Greer said their client still works outdoors and coaches his son's tee-ball team.

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