

TRAGEDY WAS WAITING, BUT NO ONE NOTICED

Crash in the making

How a 12-year-old recalled tire causes an accident that leaves one Central Florida man dead, another paralyzed

May 13, 2005

While Michael Enriquez is driving home from work on I-4 near Sanford, the Firestone tire comes apart, its tread peeling off. The Explorer goes out of control, crosses the median, flips and crashes head-on into a car driven by Douglas George Gibson of Orlando, who is killed. Enriquez suffers a broken neck and is paralyzed from the shoulders down.



THE FIRESTONE TIRE



PARALYZED



KILLED



By BENE STUTZMAN ■ SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

SANFORD

The tire was a Firestone ATK, the subject of one of the nation's biggest consumer-product recalls. Millions of Americans read or heard news reports about it in 2000 and 2001, warning that it was dangerous.

But for a decade this particular tire was just a spare, bolted to the underside of an aging Ford Explorer.

A lawsuit settled in October revealed how in 2005 — long after consumers and mechanics had stopped checking — this tire did exactly what safety officials feared: It shredded at 65 mph.

Rotated into service on the right rear hub of the 1993 sport utility vehicle, the tire flew apart on Interstate 4 near Sanford, and the Explorer went out of control.

Its driver, Michael Enriquez, a Deltona father of four on his way home from work, hit the brakes. The vehicle skidded across the median, flipped and plowed head-on into an Infiniti driven by Douglas George Gibson, 56, of Orlando.

Crystal Traugott of Orlando witnessed the crash. "We pulled over and ran

across the median to see if we could help. I looked in each of the vehicles and then stepped away as there was nothing I could do but pray," she wrote in a statement for the Florida Highway Patrol.

Before the accident, the Explorer passed through a long chain of owners, including three families, several dealers and auto traders. None, though, was harmed by what turned out to be a ticking time bomb of a tire. All that changed

PLEASE SEE TIRE, A10

Tracking the tire



April 1993

The tire is produced at a Firestone plant in Juliette, Quebec, Canada.

May 1993

It's shipped to a Ford plant in Louisville, Ky., where it's placed on a 1993 white Ford Explorer. Ford then ships the Explorer to Plantation Ford, a dealership that leases it out for a year and then sells it to an auto wholesaler that trades it to a Sarasota dealer.

The owners



Nov. 1994

Carolyn Mills-Meyer, a Sarasota fitness-club employee, buys the Explorer to drive to and from work and on errands. The tire is stored beneath the cargo compartment as a spare.



July 2000

Linda L. Dickson, a friend of Mills-Meyer, buys the Explorer for her son, Kevin Fleming, a student at the University of Central Florida. Fleming twice uses the spare when he has a flat, but the spare goes back into its rack.



Sept. 2004

Linda L. Dickson and her son, Kevin Fleming, donate the Explorer, with about 125,000 miles on it, to The Purple Heart Services Foundation, a Tampa-area nonprofit. The vehicle is sold through an auto auction to an Oryedo dealer, Dynamic Cars.

Oct. 2004

Michael and Raquel Enriquez, a Deltona couple, buy the Explorer, with the Firestone now on the right front hub, as her work vehicle. They upgrade the tires, buying three used Michelins, and shift the Firestone to the right rear.

SOURCES: Circuit Court, Florida Highway Patrol records

TIRE

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Enriquez, then a 27-year-old security guard, broke his neck and is now paralyzed down. He cannot walk, dress or feed himself, and he breathes through a tube. Gibson suffered a skull fracture and died four days later when he was removed from life support.

"I think about this every day," said his daughter, Jennifer Gibson, 23, of Casselberry. She does not blame Enriquez. In the hospital, she visited and tried to comfort him. He was on the same floor as her father.

"I would take my rosary in there," she said. "I would put my hand on his chest. I would say, 'It's OK. It's all right.'"

She sued Firestone; Ford Motor Co., which had equipped its Explorers with the faulty tires; and Sears, Roebuck & Co., which had serviced the SUV—including its tires — several times after the recall. Her lawsuit, filed in state circuit court in Sanford, was settled last spring.

The Enriquez family sued the same companies, also in circuit court in Sanford. It negotiated a multimillion-

dollar settlement, to which a judge recently gave final approval.

None of the parties would disclose settlement terms, and there was no assignment of blame. The Florida Highway Patrol, which investigated the accident, did not equivocate, however. It concluded the tire caused the crash.

'No recall is perfect'

Nationally, it's not clear how many people were killed in crashes linked to the recalled tires, said Rae Tyson, a spokesman with the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration in Washington. The federal government stopped counting in 2001. Back then, the totals were 637 injured and 271 killed.

Firestone and Ford worked diligently to get the tires off the road, Tyson said.

"You really could not have avoided hearing about the Firestone tire recall in 2000, 2001," he said. "It was everywhere. It was in newspapers, magazines, radio — you name it."

Firestone, working with Ford to notify vehicle owners, recovered 95 percent of the 6.5 million recalled tires still on the road back then, said Dan MacDonald, a

spokesman for Bridgestone Americas Holding Inc., Firestone's parent company. And in 2006, Bridgestone/Firestone renewed its effort, saying about 200,000 were still in use.

The recall covered Firestone Radial ATX, Radial ATX II and Wilderness AT tires in size P235/75R15.

The one remaining original-equipment tire on the Enriquezes' Explorer "slipped through the cracks," said his attorney, Paul Byron. "It was a very effective recall, but no recall is perfect."

How many remain in use today?

"We have no clue how many tires are on the road," MacDonald said.

The most unlucky guy

Michael Enriquez lives at home, where his family provides around-the-clock care. He is, Byron said, "the most unlucky guy in the world."

Seven months before the crash, his wife, Raquel, had gone to a small Oviedo auto dealer, looking to buy a vehicle that had caught her eye, Byron said. It wasn't there, but she saw the 1993 white Ford Explorer with about 125,000 miles on it and bought it.

"If they'd have bought a different vehicle, they'd be

all right," Byron said.

Shortly before the purchase, an auto trader or mechanic had pulled out the spare — the ATX — and placed it on the Explorer, Byron said.

The Enriquez family was the third to own the SUV.

At the time Firestone recalled the tire, the Explorer belonged to its second owner, Linda L. Dickson, a Sarasota mother who gave it to her son, Kevin Fleming, a student at the University of Central Florida.

"It was reliable. You know, just — I was happy to have a new car. Didn't have any big problems," Fleming told attorneys in a sworn statement.

When Kevin was home on a visit, his stepfather, John W. Dickson, examined its tires to see whether they matched the recall paperwork. Firestone had mailed to their house, John Dickson told attorneys in a sworn statement.

"I checked the four on the ground. I'm not certain about the spare," Dickson said. "I think I checked the spare, but I don't know for

certain."

Either way, Dickson signed the paperwork, indicating the SUV no longer had any of the defective tires, and returned it to Bridgestone/Firestone.

Dickson, who has since moved to the Virgin Islands, did not return phone calls. Fleming was unavailable for comment.

Mechanics blamed

The crash victims' families argued in court pleadings that Sears, America's No. 1 tire retailer, should have spotted and replaced the recalled tire. Sears mechanics serviced the SUV seven times during Dickson's ownership, well after the recall, said Byron, the Enriquezes' attorney.

Sears would not comment.

"It should never have happened," Jennifer Gibson said of the crash. "Somebody should have looked carefully enough to see the tire."

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