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## ARGENTINA OUSTS MEXICO

A day after the U.S. is eliminated from the World Cup, its neighbor follows suit. **SPORTS C1**



## Grieving parents triumph over 'Goliath'

**CLOSURE:** Couple wins lawsuit over rental car company blamed for daughters' 2004 deaths.

By **Tony Castro** Staff Writer

Callie and Chuck Houck always thought their two daughters would become their legacy.

Now, it's up to the Houcks to maintain their daughters' legacy.

In 2004, Raechel, 24, and Jacqueline, 20

— both world travelers and artists raised in Ventura County — were killed in a fiery head-on collision on Highway 101 in Monterey County as they were returning to their home in Santa Cruz.

It was a tragedy that would bring on almost six more years of heartbreak and distress as the Houcks, who are divorced and live in Ojai and Agoura Hills, waged a long legal battle against an American corporate giant to seek justice in their daughters' untimely deaths and redeem their profound loss.

"This was a David and Goliath story,"

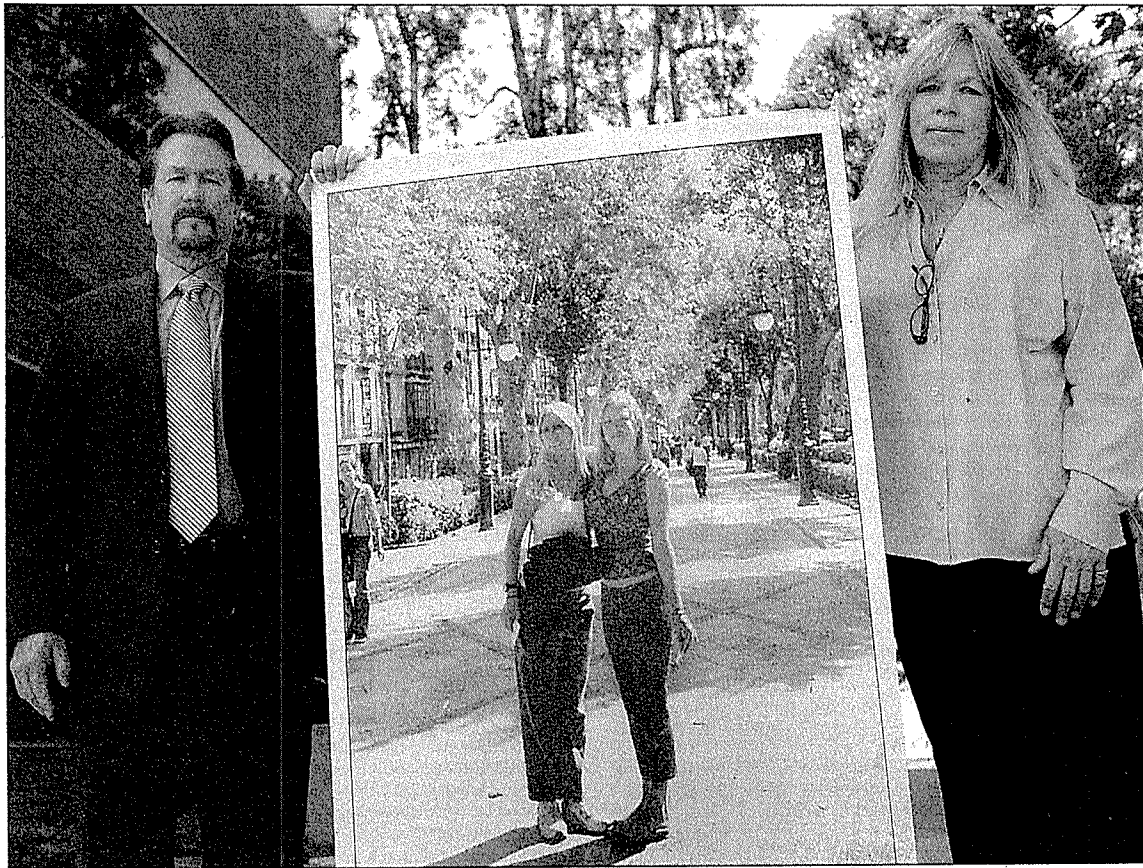
**DN ONLINE:** Learn more about the Ragejax Foundation at <http://ragejax.org>.

says Carol "Callie" Houck, 56, a lawyer. "It was us against the largest car rental agency in the world, whose annual revenue in 2008 was \$8.1 billion, a company with unlimited resources and which employs a full-time lobbyist in Washington."

**LAWSUIT A5**

**"It would have spoke volumes for a guy just to come to my door and knock on it and say, 'Oh, my God, we're so sorry. This was our mistake.' That would have been all I needed."**

— CHUCK HOUCK



Andy Holzman Staff Photographer

Chuck and Callie Houck hold a photo of daughters Raechel and Jacqueline, who died in a faulty rental car in 2004.

## LAWSUIT

FROM PAGE A1

But last week, David triumphed.

An Alameda County Superior Court jury awarded the Houcks a \$15 million judgment against Enterprise Rent-A-Car of San Francisco and its parent company after they admitted that "their negligence was the sole proximate cause of the fatal injuries" to the two sisters, according to a document signed by Enterprise attorneys.

Enterprise and its parent company admitted that the 2004 PT Cruiser that the company rented to the Houck sisters had been recalled by Daimler Chrysler a month before their deaths because of potentially dangerous and unsafe power steering hoses, which could leak and cause a fire.

Enterprise admitted it had not repaired the vehicle and had even rented it to three other customers before renting it to the Houck sisters.

"It would have spoke volumes for a guy just to come to my door and knock on it and say, 'Oh, my God, we're so sorry. This was our mistake.' That would have been all I needed," said Chuck Houck, 56, the service manager for a BMW dealership in Thousand Oaks.

But instead, according to Larry Grassini, the Houcks' Woodland Hills-based attorney, Enterprise put the parents through an emotional roller-coaster. Grassini said Enterprise's legal strategy was to wear them down and disparage their daughters' reputation.

"For five and a half years," said Callie Houck, "Enterprise hammered us with a team of experts who kept saying that our oldest daughter was responsible for killing herself and her baby sister, and then (they) admitted it was Enterprise who was responsible just before the trial started."

"Their arrogance and their meanness throughout all of this was overpowering," said Chuck Houck. "Enterprise kept saying it was Raechel's fault. That she committed suicide or whatever."

"At one point, their lawyers mentioned — it was an off-the-record conversation but they said it in a way that you could

overhear it, that it could have been 'one of those Thelma and Louise stories.'"

The Houcks filed the lawsuit in Alameda County because Enterprise Rent-A-Car of San Francisco has its corporate headquarters there. The faulty PT Cruiser had been rented to the Houck sisters in Capitola at a location owned by Enterprise Rent-A-Car of San Francisco.

The sisters had driven the car to their mother's home for a family visit and for Raechel to be fitted for a bridesmaid dress for a friend's upcoming wedding.

They were heading to Santa Cruz, driving northbound on the 101 Freeway outside of King City on Oct. 7, 2004, when the PT Cruiser apparently caught fire. Smoke could be seen under the hood as the car swerved over the grass median and into oncoming traffic, smashing head-on into an 18-wheel truck, the driver of the big rig later testified.

The sisters died at the scene.

When Enterprise later decided to admit wrongdoing as part of its trial strategy, the company offered a \$3 million settlement to the Houcks contingent on keeping the company's liability statements confidential, according to Grassini.

But the Houcks chose to have their day in court.

"I wasn't about to let my daughters become a statistic," said Callie Houck. "That was not going to happen. I taught my girls that there are consequences when you hurt somebody. And I also taught them that there are social responsibilities that you have as well."

"This was not about the money. This was about the consequences."

Enterprise has 30 days to decide whether to appeal.

In a statement, Greg Stubblefield, executive vice president and chief strategy officer for Enterprise, said that "given all we have learned, today we would ground the recalled PT Cruiser until repaired."

"This was a long, complicated and difficult case for all involved, one that had to work its way through the court system to reach resolution," Stubblefield said. "But, more significantly, this is a terrible tragedy for the Houck family."

"Our hearts go out to them, and we are very sorry for their loss."

During the trial, testimony revealed that it was Enterprise's policy to routinely rent recalled vehicles to the public without repairing them.

"(A)t the corporate level, their philosophy was that, 'If all you have are recalled vehicles on the lot, you rent them out,'" Mark Matias, a former area manager for Enterprise of San Francisco, said in court documents. "It was a given. The whole company did it."

Testimony also showed that the PT Cruiser that was rented to Raechel Houck was the last car on the company's lot that day and it had been represented to her as a "free upgrade."

Both Houcks said their legal battle to redeem the loss of their daughters was a duty they each had.

"Especially when people make accusations like that (the suicide allegation)," said Chuck Houck. "They don't get to get away with it."

The Houcks, who also have a 21-year-old son, say they will use the award to further fund the RageJax Foundation, a nonprofit agency dedicated to helping kids in impoverished countries that they established to honor their daughters, who had lived abroad and wanted to help needy children.

"My daughters appreciated diversity," said Callie Houck. "They were travelers, not tourists. They wanted to immerse themselves in the country in which they were."

Rage and Jax were Raechel and Jacqueline's nicknames, and the foundation has already been involved in helping children in Central America and has also bought a stretch of land in Colon, Nicaragua.

"I have a duty and a desire to keep the things that were important to them — their goals and their dreams and their visions — I have a duty to continue that in their name," said Callie Houck.

"And maybe there's a child out there who will be given an opportunity to create, and if we can do that, then I'll feel that we've accomplished a lot. And that they have lived on."

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