



'I want Ereck to keep helping others'

Ereck Plancher stops for a photo on the campus of UCF in this February 2008 photo. He died the following month.

SENTINEL FILE

Gisele and Enoch Plancher still mourning the loss of 'perfect son'

By **Ilana Linton** | STAFF WRITER

Gisele Plancher, mother of UCF football player Ereck Plancher, sobbed and reached for the car door handle the moment she learned her son died.

"My sister was driving me home when we got the phone call," Gisele Plancher said. "I tried to open the car door because I wanted it to run over me and kill me. That's the only thing that can come to my head. My sister kept stopping me. I just wanted to get under the car and end all the pain. I was out of control."

In an exclusive interview with the Orlando Sentinel, Enoch and Gisele Plancher said the pain has never stopped since their son died following UCF football offseason conditioning drills on March 18, 2008.

"He was my best friend," Gisele Plancher said. "I miss him so much every day of my life."

The Planchers said they are grateful a jury on Thursday ruled the UCF Athletics Association was negligent in Ereck Plancher's death and awarded them \$10 million in damages. They called the trial and verdict an important part of their son's legacy, but they

Please turn to **PLANCHER, C5**

INSIDE

■ Timeline of key developments in the Plancher case, C5

■ National reaction to the court decision, C5

ONLINE

■ For video and more related to the Plancher case, go to OrlandoSentinel.com.



Ereck Plancher's initials are painted in the end zone during the UCF football spring game in April 2008.

RICARDO RAMIREZ BUJEDA/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



UCF coach George O'Leary testifies in the Ereck Plancher civil trial at the Orange County courthouse.

GEORGE SENE/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER



Ereck Plancher's casket is brought into the auditorium of Lely High in Naples for a memorial service in 2008.

STEPHEN M. DOWELL/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

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Top, Gisele and Enoch Plancher listen to opening statements at the Ereck Plancher civil trial. Below, the parents are congratulated after the jury ruled in their favor.

READ HUBER (TOP), GEORGE SENE/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

GEORGE SENE/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

PLANCHER

Continued from Page C1

want Ereck Plancher to be remembered for more than heated debates in court.

"He was the perfect son," Enoch Plancher said. "He tried to have a strict life. He tried to set a good example for everyone, not only in sports but in everything he did."

Enock and Gisele Plancher both grew up in Haiti. They both moved to the United States in search of a better life. They met in Naples, fell in love and got married.

Their first child, Ereck Michael Plancher, was born on Dec. 13, 1988.

"It was the best day of my life," Gisele Plancher said.

Ereck Plancher was an easy-going, polite child. He was always close to his mother, sneaking up behind her and covering her with kisses.

She said Ereck Plancher was so loving and well behaved, she tried to give him everything he wanted.

When he was young, that meant letting him wear tuxedos or Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles T-shirts. As he grew older, she bought him video games and a laptop.

Ereck Plancher was 9 years old when his younger brother, Edwin, was born.

"Ereck took care of Edwin until the day he died," Enoch Plancher said. "He loved him. They'd do everything together."

Edwin Plancher is now 13 years old. His parents said they think he is coping relatively well with his brother's death. He enjoys playing video games and has a large network of friends and family in Naples.

By the time Edwin was born, his older brother already was passionate about football.

Ereck Plancher didn't make the varsity football team until his junior year at Lely High, but the work ethic he learned watching his father run a shipping business and his mother juggle two jobs helped him earn a UCF scholarship.

He convinced his parents it was a good idea to enroll at UCF in January 2007, six months earlier than most of the freshman class. Enoch Plancher said his son told him he wanted to get his degree quickly so that he could help take care of his family.

Gisele Plancher remembers moving Ereck Plancher into his dorm room and them crying all

TIMELINE OF KEY DEVELOPMENTS

■ **March 18, 2008:** Ereck Plancher dies after an offseason conditioning workout supervised by coach George O'Leary and his staff.

■ **July 17, 2008:** Orange County medical examiner Joshua Stephany's final autopsy report states Plancher died from complications of sickle cell trait.

■ **March 12, 2009:** Enoch and Gisele Plancher, Ereck Plancher's parents, file a wrongful-death lawsuit against the UCF Athletic Association and UCF board of trustees.

■ **Sept. 24, 2010:** Circuit Judge Robert M. Evans rules the UCFAA is not operating as a state agency. The ruling means UCFAA could face unlimited settlement claims.

■ **March 25, 2011:** Evans rules the Planchers are eligible to seek punitive damages, but they must prove O'Leary ordered water and athletic trainers be removed from Plancher's final workout.

■ **June 13, 2011:** The trial begins. The Plancher family attorneys drop their claim against the board of trustees.

■ **June 15, 2011:** Attorneys complete opening statements. Plancher family attorney Steve Yerrid argues Plancher died from



STEPHEN M. DOWELL/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Brian Watters, front, joined his UCF teammates in a memorial service for Ereck Plancher at Lely High School in Naples in 2008.

complications of sickle cell trait and his life could have been saved if he had been pulled from the workout.

UCFAA attorney Dan Shapiro tells the jury Plancher died from an undiagnosed heart condition. He says no one could have saved Plancher's life and no one was responsible for his death.

■ **June 30, 2011:** Attorneys deliver their closing statements after three contentious weeks. After about five hours of deliber-

ation, a jury finds UCFAA negligent in Plancher's death and awards the Planchers \$10 million. The jury determines UCFAA was not liable for punitive damages, indicating the Plancher family did not provide "clear and convincing evidence" O'Leary endangered Plancher's life by ordering water and athletic trainers out his last workout.

UCFAA announces it will file appeals.

— Iliana Limón

the way home. She called her son seven times a day, risking interrupting him in class just to hear his voice.

"Whenever I would cry, he would always tell me, 'Mommy, I love you. Don't cry. Everything will be OK,'" Gisele Plancher said.

On Tuesday, March 18, 2008, the Planchers said their world was shattered.

They learned of their son's death, and the week that followed was a blur of tears and searing pain.

More than 3,000 people attended Ereck Plancher's memorial service.

His parents said they remain grateful for all the community support.

"God put so many people in my life to help me," Gisele Plancher said. "I needed all of them."

Gisele Plancher fell into a deep depression, forcing her to take four months off work after her son died. For the first month, relatives had to help feed her. She began taking medication to con-

trol the depression and sleepless nights. Her husband has also suffered health problems.

She eventually returned to work at Moorings Park, an assisted living facility where her supervisor let her take breaks when she was overwhelmed with sadness.

Amid their grief, the Planchers said they struggled to get clear answers about what caused their son's death. They ultimately decided to file a wrongful death lawsuit against UCFAA.

"We want really to know the truth about how Ereck died," Enoch Plancher said. "They didn't want to tell us the truth. And also, we want to teach them a lesson about how to protect their kids."

The Planchers sat in the courtroom during the three-week trial.

Their attorneys argued Ereck Plancher died from complications of sickle cell trait and could have been saved if UCFAA staff had intervened when he showed signs of distress. UCFAA attorneys insisted he died of an undiagnosed heart condition

and no one could have saved his life.

"It was so hard for me to be in the courtroom and listen to the evidence," Gisele Plancher said. "I cry so much when I listen to some of the stories."

UCFAA is planning its appeals. Plancher family attorneys are confident the jury's verdict will not be overturned.

The Planchers thanked their attorneys and returned to Naples Saturday. They will go back to work Monday, skipping holiday celebrations.

They said they hope the attention surrounding trial will help protect other athletes with sickle cell trait.

"That was a terrible thing, a mother losing a child," Gisele Plancher said. "I don't want that to happen to anyone. I want Ereck to keep helping others. I want him to save others."

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