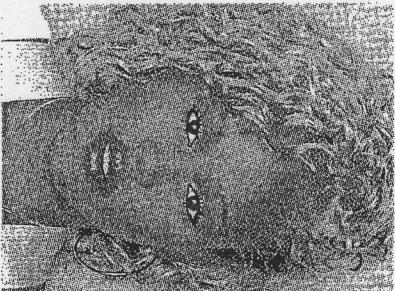


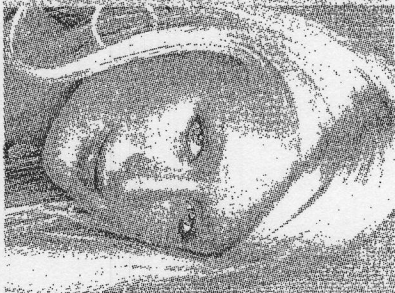
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now I can never
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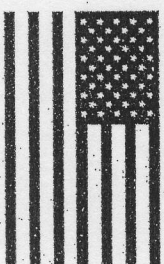
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THURSDAY, JULY 31, 2003

LATE SPORTS FINAL



FLY THE FLAG



Attorneys Thomas Zimmerman Jr. (left) and Mikal Watts, with Fortunata Limonez and Delia Jimenez, whose son Zeus Limonez died in the van crash, talk about the lawsuit Wednesday. —ROBERT A. DAVIS/SUN-TIMES

Crash victims sue DaimlerChrysler

Allege 15-passenger vehicle is unsafe; company defends van

BY LUCIO GUERRERO
Staff Reporter

A Dodge van that crashed while carrying 18 people to visit prisons Downstate earlier this month—killing two children and injuring 16 others—was defective and unsafe for the road, according to attorneys for families of those killed.

A lawsuit filed last week by the mother of one dead child was amended Wednesday to include the relatives of the other young victim, and it names DaimlerChrysler as a defendant.

"This van is defective, and it is unreasonably dangerous and needs to be pulled off the road," said attorney Mikal Watts, who along with attorney Thomas A. Zimmerman, Jr., is representing the families of the dead children.

The plaintiffs claim the defects include a tendency for the vehicle to oversteer, making it difficult to get the van back on the road if it leaves the surface, and an overhang on the roof that makes the back of the vehicle too heavy and prone to swerve in attempts to regain control.

The van was southbound on Interstate 57 south of Kankakee en route from Chicago to the Big Muddy Correctional Center, a medium-security prison in southern Illinois, and Centralia Correctional Center with inmates' family members when it flipped over, rolled several times and lost its roof. Sixteen of the 18 passengers were thrown from the van. Eight-month-old Desmond Brown and 3-year-old Zeus Limonez died in the crash.

DaimlerChrysler officials said the company stands behind the van's performance. A company spokeswoman said that the firm is doing its own investigation into the crash, and that the Dodge van had passed all government safety standards.

The 15-passenger vans, mostly used by churches and universities, are being looked at by the Na-

tional Transportation Safety Board in rollover accidents.

Preliminary Illinois State Police reports said driver fatigue and speeding may have been to blame. Police also said the driver, Douglas King, did not have a commercial driver's license, the van was packed beyond its 15-passenger capacity, and the Willis Bus Company was not properly licensed to charge riders.

The lawsuit brought by the victims' families also names King, Willis Bus Service, and its owner, George W. Willis, as defendants.