

GM CRASH & \$PURN

Stiffing LI girls over seat-belt horror

By WILLIAM J. GORTA

They ain't too proud to beg for billions, but when it comes to compensating two Long Island girls critically injured in a horrific head-on crash, General Motors officials are telling the kids' family to settle for "pennies" — or get nothing at all when the auto giant goes belly up, court papers show.

The girls — one of whom is now a quadriplegic — likely face a lifetime of medical bills.

GM's lawyers "threatened" the girls' lawyers, saying they should accept a "considerably significant reduction" in any potential settlement. "lest their claims be wiped out in a bankruptcy reorganiza-

tion," according to papers filed in Suffolk County Supreme Court by Stanley Sanders, lawyer for one of the children.

"Their claims will either be wiped out in their entirety, or at best they will be offered [and have no alternative but to accept] pennies on the dollar.

"As such, these two catastrophically injured young girls will go uncompensated for their devastating injuries."

Sanders asked the court to give their case "special preference" and speed the process so it can be decided by trial — or settled — before GM goes bankrupt.

"The least GM could do as it takes \$15 billion dol-



EMMA COLL

Neck broken in crash.

lars from the American public is to settle these cases fairly," he said.

Emma Coll and her cousin Amanda Dinnigan suffered horrific injuries when the family's GMC Envoy crashed into a tree in Smithtown, Suffolk County, in February 2007.

The girls, then ages 9 and 8, were in the third row of seats wearing seatbelts and shoulder restraints. But the adult-size harnesses snapped tight on the girls' necks in the 42 mph head-on crash.

Emma, whose neck was broken, has "plates and screws all over" and will probably need a series of surgeries as she grows, Sanders said. Amanda, he said, is paralyzed and needs a breathing tube to survive.

Sanders, who represents Emma, charged in the initial lawsuit that the restraint system was inadequate for children under 12, who can "submarine" in their seats on sudden impact because the shoulder

harnesses are too high to restrain them.

"GM knew about the danger of the seat belts but made a financial decision to install them, figuring it's cheaper to defend [in court] than to correct," Sanders said. "Now they don't even want to do that."

GM, which reached a deal with the United Auto Workers last Thursday, has to have a restructuring plan in place by June 1 or face bankruptcy.

Bondholders have until tomorrow to accept a 10 percent stake in the automaker in exchange for retiring the debt.

Neither GM nor their lawyer returned a call for comment.