

Toyota settles 2 crash suits

■ Owners claim cars accelerated

By Ken Bensinger
Los Angeles Times

Toyota Motor Corp. has quietly moved to settle two high-profile sudden acceleration lawsuits in recent weeks in what appears to be a strategy to keep potentially damaging cases away from juries.

The confidential negotiations, which include a case involving two deaths in a horrific 2010 crash in Utah, come on the heels of a \$1.1 billion settlement late last month. That deal involved hundreds of plaintiffs who contended Toyota diminished the value of their vehicles by hiding defects. And in November, Toyota paid \$25.5 million to settle shareholder claims that failure to disclose vehicle problems led to a drop in the company's stock price.

Even after these settlements, the world's largest automaker still faces more than 300 sudden acceleration lawsuits in state and federal courts. Many of the plaintiffs assert that faulty electronics were to blame, allegations that Toyota has consistently denied. The company has steadfastly maintained that the only defects that could have caused the problem were improperly installed floor mats and sticky gas pedals for which the automaker instituted recalls. Several government investigations found no flaws in the automaker's electronics and pointed to driver error as a more likely cause.

Still, legal experts said juries hearing emotional cases involving serious injuries or deaths could come to a different conclusion, potentially exposing Toyota to massive, headline-grabbing verdicts that could sully its reputation. The automaker, they said, appears to be following a well-worn playbook used by big companies in mass litigation: Settle cases in which the risk of losing is deemed too great, and aggressively defend those that would play favorably in court.

"The strategy is to settle and move on rather than risk a huge loss," said Byron Stier, an expert on major products litigation at Southwestern Law School in Los Angeles who has extensively studied the Toyota cases. "The wrong case could stir up a lot of bad publicity, so just move on."

Keith White, owner/operator of two successful Evansville-based businesses — Liggon Trucking and Liggon Transport — has a noticeable robust entrepreneurial spirit about him. He's very convincing when he says, "If I see an opportunity and feel it is well calculated, I go for it."



Keith White, an entrepreneur, operates two trucking companies — Liggon Transport, an over-the-road hauler using tractor-trailers, and Liggon Trucking out of Evansville.

HAULING UP BY HIS BOOTSTRAPS

Trucking firm owner had the spirit, just needed a chance

White's long record of having created and operated different businesses, besides his trucking companies, reflects his interest in taking advantage of opportunities.

For the last couple of years White, a minority business owner, has participated in the Toyota Opportunity Exchange program, which matches minority businesses with its suppliers.

Toyota officials say among those who have attended success stories number in the hundreds and have brought more than \$75 million in contracts awarded.

Over the course of two decades, the exchange has added value and innovation to Toyota's products and services while helping direct suppliers diversify their own supply base, officials said.

Through the program, White was able to solidify a deal with Tier 1 supplier Millennium Steel Service that allowed him to add the flatbed-hauling division, Liggon Transport, to his company.

It also has helped bring White the addition of 10 employees, six transport trucks and \$1.5 million in new revenue.

Additionally, he has on order four new trucks for his transport operation.

His Liggon Hauling includes a fleet of four trucks.

White largely credits his childhood years as an orphan, raised in Sturgeon, Ky., by his great-aunt, Pernizer Liggon, with influencing him.

"Pernizer was everything to me," he said. "She was very entrepreneurial-minded. She believed in pulling herself up by her bootstraps — She didn't want anything from others. She believed in going out and creating it herself." She sounded just like White.

Between 1997-1998, he helped create and run a women's personal training program with Impact Ministries in collaboration with Dr. Karen F. Neoley, a family practitioner for St. Mary's Medical Center.



Liggon Transport office manager Sheila Washington and fleet manager Rob Hornbrook work recently together in their office at Liggon Transport Inc. in Evansville.

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"She volunteered her time in the inner city and I volunteered my time."

White left the program in 2000 to start Midwest One Mortgage Services in Evansville.

"That's when the entrepreneur bug really hit me," he said. "I used my own money to go into business for myself. Some days I didn't know how I'd be able to keep it together. But, for whatever my faith was it allowed me to keep it going," White said.

He shuttered the business in 2008 when the market started to crash, he said.

Then, using money he put back from the mortgage company operation, he started a regional dump-truck business and named it Liggon for his great aunt.

As the business grew, he acquired a line of credit from First Security Bank.

When White decided to take advantage of Toyota's Opportunity Exchange in Cincinnati, he was working with Millennium Steel, a Princeton-based Tier I supplier to Toyota, to expand to a flatbed-hauling business.

Millennium, a minority-owned business, is located across from the Toyota plant.

The Toyota Opportunity Exchange offered White a free trade show and conference designed to build lasting business relationships between Toyota Tier I (direct) suppliers and minority business enterprises.

The two-day event aims to allow minority owned businesses the opportunity to network and build relationships with Toyota's suppliers.

"Attending helped us see another avenue for growth," White said.

"Toyota has created a legacy of encouraging its Tier I suppliers to develop and open the door for smaller minority-owned companies. We see much more potential growth," White said.

"My intention is to mentor and help bring along other young inspiring entrepreneurs. That is the Toyota way and that is what I want to do."

Liggon delivers steel coil for Millennium Steel to the Toyota Motor Manufacturing Indiana plant in Gibson County as well as to other customers.

White said his company always is looking for drivers. For more information about the Toyota program, call Tania Saldana at 859-815-9968. To apply with Liggon, visit www.employment@liggontransport.com.



LEFT: A Ligon Transport truck makes a stop at Millennium Steel Service in Princeton, Ind., recently to pick up a load.

BELOW: Keith White, an entrepreneur, operates two trucking companies — Ligon Transport, an over-the-road hauler using tractor-trailers, and Ligon Trucking out of Evansville.



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