

## 2010 LAWYER OF THE YEAR

# John Gomez: Igniting a Toyota Firestorm

By Sylvia Hsieh  
Staff writer

When he agreed to take a tragic case involving a family who careened to their death in their 2009 Toyota Lexus ES 350, John Gomez had no idea it would spark a massive recall of millions of vehicles, a federal investigation and a nationwide mass tort over sudden unintended acceleration.

"This was the one that really got things started," said Gomez, who heads the six-attorney firm The Gomez Law Firm in San Diego.

Gomez represents the parents of Mark Saylor, the California highway patrol officer who drove the vehicle carrying his wife Cleofe, his daughter Mahala and his brother-in-law Chris Lastrella.

Even though a growing number of Toyota drivers had been complaining about cars suddenly taking off at

high speeds on their own, this case had two things the others didn't: solid credibility and a 911 call.

"They were on the phone with 911 [during the accident] saying that the accelerator was stuck and the brakes don't work. In the past [Toyota] could say they imagined it or it was driver error, but Saylor was a highway patrolman so it was hard to say those things in our case," Gomez said

Gomez settled the case with Toyota this year for \$10 million and continues to represent the family against the dealership.

Even though the case started the whole litigation, it is Gomez' only sudden-acceleration case.

"We're pretty selective, and we don't want to take positions that are adverse to our clients' position," he said, noting that a case against Toyota for mechani-

cal defect could undercut his clients' claim against the dealership for placing all-weather mats in the car that interfered with the accelerator pedal.

In another case this year, Gomez won a \$8.6 million jury verdict for a woman who suffered brain damage in a head-on collision with a Pizza Hut delivery driver who hid her epilepsy in order to drive.

Representing injured people is more rewarding than his former job as a federal prosecutor, which he left in 2000, Gomez said.

"I didn't get a whole lot of joy in sending people to prison; I do get a whole lot of joy helping to improve people's lives," he said.

Raised by a single mom, Gomez says his roaming childhood has helped him as a plaintiffs' personal injury attorney.



"I went to three different high schools here in San Diego, and we were always bouncing around. I was exposed to a lot of different people, and it carries over. Part of it is just being comfortable with and respectful of different people. I pretty much can communicate with anyone," he said.

Outside of work, Gomez serves as chairman of La Cuna, a nonprofit organization that helps place Latino foster children into permanent homes.

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