

(SUB)CULTURE

## Vanessa Bryant Breaks Down Crying on First Day of Trial Over Kobe Crash Scene Photos

*“They poured salt in an unhealable wound,” Vanessa’s lawyer Luis Li told jurors on the first day of trial in the invasion of privacy case*

By Nancy Dillon | August 10, 2022

Vanessa Bryant quietly sobbed in a federal courtroom Wednesday as her lawyer described for jurors the graphic nature of a photo that a sheriff’s deputy purportedly shared with random people at a bar two days after her NBA superstar husband Kobe Bryant and daughter Gianna died in a helicopter crash alongside seven others in January 2020.

The lawyer, Luis Li, said a whistleblower who was at the Baja California Bar & Grill in Norwalk that day was so disturbed by Deputy Joey Cruz’s actions that he filed a formal complaint with the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Office, claiming the deputy was “showing pictures of [Kobe’s] decapitated body.”

In his dramatic opening statement, Li showed jurors a video of Deputy Cruz seated at the bar and holding his cell phone up to a bartender to show him something. The bartender visibly recoils at what he sees and walks away.

“January 26, 2020, was and always will be the worst day of Vanessa Bryant’s life,” Li told the 10-member jury selected earlier Wednesday to hear the expected 10-day trial for the the grieving widow’s invasion of privacy lawsuit against Los Angeles County. “County employees exploited the accident. They took and shared pictures of Kobe and Gianna as souvenirs. ...They poured salt in an unhealable wound.”

Li said that first responders, including fire officials, “walked around the wreckage and took pictures of broken bodies from the helicopter crash. They took close-ups of limbs, of burnt flesh. It shocks the conscience.” He played audio of one detective admitting that his own wife declined to view the photos after he described them as “piles of meat.”

Vanessa Bryant filed her lawsuit eight months after the horrific Jan. 26, 2020, crash, saying she suffered severe emotional distress

and became physically “ill” over the thought of strangers “gawking” at grisly images of her husband and 13-year-old daughter. She alleges the photos were taken by first responders “for their own personal gratification.”

“The gratuitous images soon became talked about within the department, as deputies displayed them to colleagues in settings that had nothing to do with investigating the accident. One deputy even used his photos of the victims to try to impress a woman at a bar, bragging about how he had been at the crash site,” her filings allege.

She further claims a Los Angeles County fire official received crash scene photos from colleagues that he later shared with off-duty firefighters and their wives and girlfriends during an awards ceremony at a Hilton hotel in February 2020.

County lawyers argue the case has no legal merit because no pho-

tos ever leaked to the public. “It is undisputed that the complained-of photos have never been in the media, on the Internet, or otherwise publicly disseminated. Plaintiff Vanessa Bryant has never seen county photos of her family members,” the lawyers have argued.

County lawyer Mira Hashmall said in her dueling opening statement that Deputy Cruz was new on the job when the deadly crash happened and deeply regrets his actions. She was adamant the county did not violate the Bryant family’s constitutional rights by publicly disseminating unauthorized photos.

“The county continues to express its deepest sympathies for the families that suffered this terrible loss.

The county has also worked tirelessly for two and half years to make sure its site photos of the crash were never publicly disseminated. The evidence shows they never were. And that is fact, not speculation,” Hashmall, a partner at the Miller Barondess law firm, said in a statement shared with Rolling Stone.

U.S. District Judge John Walter consolidated Bryant’s lawsuit with a similar one filed by Orange County financial adviser Chris Chester, who lost his wife Sarah, and the couple’s 13-year-old daughter, Payton, in the crash.

“This case is about accountability. We’re going to prove to you that county employees took pictures and shared them widely,” Li told the ju-

rors Wednesday. He claimed the images were shared in so many ways to so many people, it’s impossible to guarantee a leak won’t happen sometime in the future.

“Every single day since the county did what it did, Mrs. Bryant and Mr. Chester have the risk, have the fear, have the anxiety, have the terror that they might have to re-live the loss of their family members in the most excruciating way,” Li said.

Kobe Bryant, 41, was traveling with his daughter and six others to a youth basketball tournament when his chartered helicopter crashed into a hillside in Calabasas, California, amid dense fog, killing everyone on board, including the pilot.