

## **Suit Claims Employee's Drowning at the Omni Houston Hotel Was Preventable**

With prior floods and ample warning, Omni Hotels failed to keep employees and guests safe during Hurricane Harvey

DALLAS (June 4, 2018) – The family of Jill Renick, a 48-year-old Omni Houston Hotel employee who drowned in the hotel during Hurricane Harvey in 2017, has filed a lawsuit against Omni Hotels claiming Renick died of drowning due to the hotel's gross negligence and conscious disregard for their guests. The suit also names Otis Elevator as a defendant, citing the absence of flood sensors on the hotel's elevators.

The lawsuit filed today, June 4, with the 44th Civil District Court in Dallas County, Texas, details previous flooding at the hotel, the flooding of the Omni Hotel's basement on Aug. 27, 2017, information from video footage showing Renick in the flood waters, and the alleged failures of Omni Hotels.

"Jill's death was horrific and easily preventable," said the family's lawyer Rob Crain of Crain Lewis Brogdon, LLP. "This hotel has a history of flooding as it sits in a low-lying area next to a river."

Crain continued, "Not only was there ample warning of heavy rain accompanying Hurricane Harvey, the Omni knew their basement was flooding that morning; it is unconscionable to leave the elevators operating, to not barricade around the elevators to prevent their use, and to not warn Jill and the other guests of this life-threatening danger. In a flood, elevators are death traps."

The Omni Houston Hotel was built in 1981 with 378 guest rooms. Renick worked as the hotel's director of spa services in the 7,100-square-foot Mokara Spa.

The 11-story Omni Houston Hotel, located at 4 Riverway, Houston, TX 77056, is no stranger to flooding due to its adjacent location to Buffalo Bayou. News reports show that in September 2013, May 2015 and October 2015, the Omni Houston Hotel experienced significant flooding. In the May 2015 flood, the Omni Houston Hotel was forced to close for more than a month for extensive renovation as a result of the flood.

The suit states that, as predicted for days, Hurricane Harvey was dumping heavy rain on the city of Houston. Renick and her rescued dog Sweet Pea spent the night in the hotel Aug. 26, 2017.

Throughout the night of Aug. 26, 2017, into the morning of Aug. 27, 2017, the Omni Houston Hotel management knew the Buffalo Bayou had exceeded its banks and was flooding hotel property. According to the suit, video footage from one camera provided by Omni Hotels to Renick's family shows that the basement had already begun to flood as early as 4:46 a.m. The suit details people working in the basement including a man in rain boots, yellow rain slicker and holding a communications radio. At 5:00:16 a.m., the basement floor is fully covered in water with debris floating with the current.

The suit says that at around 5:15 a.m., Renick was called by the front desk and told "to come downstairs." The suit claims, "[t]he Hotel has not provided an explanation as to what happened when Jill arrived downstairs."

At approximately 5:40 a.m., Renick used her cellphone to call the hotel's front desk and plead for help. Renick said she was trapped in the basement service elevator and that water was coming in the elevator. The hotel has provided no explanation as to why Renick would be in the service elevator as it was not accessible from her third-floor hotel room.

The suit continues, "What is known is that Jill managed to open, at least partially, the elevator door and exit the elevator into the flooding basement. Individuals on the first-floor report they could hear Jill screaming for help and beating on the inside of the elevator. At 5:44:29 AM, Jill is seen in the video coming from the area of the service elevator and toward the entrance to the Black Swan nightclub located in the basement, undoubtedly looking for a way out. Jill is seen again at 5:44:47 AM struggling against the flow of water and ambulating back in the direction of the service elevator. The video ends at 5:45:26 AM. Jill is not seen alive again. The evidence indicates Jill continues to search for oxygen. She has to get above the rising waters. She ultimately climbs above the ceiling tiles which are affixed to joist framing,

but she cannot escape the floodwaters which eventually rise to the first floor of the hotel. She drowns. Hotel employees do not find Jill's body until September 7, 2017, eleven days later."

"We can see in the video footage that Jill fought hard to find an exit. I simply cannot imagine the anguish and torment she experienced trying to find her way out. The Omni Hotel failed Jill and its guests. It's just inexcusable," Crain concluded.

Renick grew up in the Tulsa, Oklahoma, area and graduated from the University of Oklahoma with a Master of Science in sports management and the University of Central Oklahoma with a Bachelor of Science in physical education. Renick lived in the Dallas area before moving to Houston in 2015.

For a copy of the Plaintiffs' Original Petition and Request for Disclosure (CAUSE NO. DC-18-07211 THE ESTATE OF ELLA JILL RENICK vs OMNI HOTELS AND OTIS ELEVATORS) go to:

[https://www.dropbox.com/s/5djww256t0x6hcc/Plaintiffs%27%20Original%20Petition%20and%20RFD\\_Filed%20Stamped.pdf?dl=0](https://www.dropbox.com/s/5djww256t0x6hcc/Plaintiffs%27%20Original%20Petition%20and%20RFD_Filed%20Stamped.pdf?dl=0).

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