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Jury awards \$31.8 million

Texas family sued Allied Van Lines after deadly 2003 wreck

BY RICHARD BURGESS

Acadiana bureau

LAFAYETTE — A federal jury on Tuesday returned a \$31.8 million verdict in a July 2003 crash on the Atchafalaya Basin bridge that killed five people.

Police said at the time that Allied Van Lines driver Wladyslaw Gorski of Florida slammed his 18-wheeler into traffic that had stopped because of a minor accident a few miles ahead on the Interstate 10 bridge.

Gorski and four others died in the 11-car pile-up that followed.

The multimillion-dollar verdict came after three weeks of trial in a lawsuit filed against Allied Van Lines by a Texas family caught in the crash while on their way to Disney World.

"One of the troopers who worked it said it was the worst accident he had ever worked," said Houston attorney Richard Mithoff, who represented the family.

The impact of the crash launched the family's Suburban into the air, Mithoff said, and it came to rest in flames facing the wrong way on the interstate,

leaving two dead and two others with debilitating burns.

Guadalupe and Amelia Guerra were traveling with their two daughters, a cousin and a friend of one of their daughter's.

Killed were their 18-year-old daughter, Cindy, and her 9-year-old cousin, Jennifer Garza.

The other daughter, 20-year-old Lisa, and her friend, 20-year-old Joe Alfaro, suffered severe burns requiring millions of dollars in medical treatment.

The bulk of the nearly \$32 million verdict — exceptionally large for a non-class-action case — was awarded to Lisa Guerra and Joe Alfaro for medical expenses, lost earning capacity, disfigurement, and pain and suffering.

Lisa Guerra, who suffered burns on more than 65 percent of her body, was awarded \$9.1 million, and Alfaro was awarded \$13.3 million for the burns that scarred 85 percent of his body. "This will go a long way toward helping with ongoing medical expenses," Mithoff said.

The balance of the verdict

was split among surviving family members for loss of loved ones and mental anguish.

An attorney representing one of Allied Van Lines' insurance carriers did not return a call for comment.

An attorney listed as representing Allied Van Lines in the case could not be reached Tuesday afternoon.

The verdict is one of the largest returned in recent memory in Lafayette.

"This is one of the highest, I believe, in Louisiana, certainly in Lafayette," Mithoff said.

Mithoff said the jury deliberated about 6½ hours, beginning deliberations Monday afternoon and returning the verdict about 11:30 a.m. Tuesday.

The trial began March 26 before U.S. Magistrate Judge C. Michael Hill.

Also killed in the July 2003 crash were Carla Dunn, 27, of Denham Springs, and Melissa Dunn, 22, of West Monroe.