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Accident results in \$31.8 million award

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HARLINGEN — The victims of a 2003 vehicle accident in Louisiana were awarded more than \$30 million in damages by a federal court jury on Tuesday.

Cousins Jennifer Marie Garza, 9, of La Feria, and Cindy Guerra, 18, of Santa Rosa were killed in the accident. Cindy's sister Lisa Guerra and her friend Joe Alfaro, both then 20 of Santa Rosa, were left with severe injuries.

Traveling with the group were

Cindy and Lisa Guerra's parents Guadalupe and Amelia Guerra, who were treated for injuries after the accident.

On July 20, 2003, the family was on Interstate 10 en route to Disney World in Orlando, Fla., when the driver of a tractor-trailer operated by Allied Van Lines plowed into traffic that had slowed because of another accident, according to reports.

Richard Mithoff, a Houston attorney who represented the family, said the family's sport utility vehicle became airborne, caught fire and landed on the freeway in

the opposite direction. The family's Suburban exploded in flames, killing the two girls.

Lisa Guerra and Alfaro spent months in the burn unit at Baton Rouge General Medical Center. Lisa Guerra was burned over 65 percent of her body; Alfaro received burns over 85 percent of his body, including his face, arms and torso, the Mithoff Law Firm said in a news release.

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VALLEY MORNING STAR

\$31.8 MILLION

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A jury of eight women and one man ruled that Allied Van Lines was at fault in the accident, the law firm said. Jurors found that Lisa Guerra and Alfaro will require extensive medical attention, the firm said.

Doctors anticipate that Alfaro and Lisa Guerra will have to undergo more surgery, including skin grafts and skin re-surfacing, Mithoff said in a telephone interview.

"There's also other risks in regards to the injuries to their legs," he said.

"This (award) will certainly help supplement those medical and hospital expenses."

After their two-day deliber-

ations, jurors awarded Lisa Guerra \$9.1 million in damages, Alfaro \$13.2 million and Cindy Guerra's parents \$6.25 million. Jennifer Garza's parents, Rene and Patricia Garza, were awarded \$3.25 million. In total, the families were awarded \$31.8 million.

Mithoff said the families, who were traveling back from Lafayette, La., to the Rio Grande Valley after the verdict was read, were grateful for the ruling and the chance to present their case.

"The families are very gratified by the jury verdict and relieved that they will be able to provide for the medical attention that Joe (Alfaro) and Lisa (Guerra) will need in the future," Mithoff said.