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Jury Awards \$15 Million to Woman Injured in Crash With Sheriff's Deputy

By TINA BAY, Staff Writer

An Antelope Valley attorney yesterday gave trial consultants credit for a \$15 million jury award for injuries his client sustained in a 2001 collision with a Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department vehicle in Palmdale.

R. Rex Parris said he was inspired by communications consultant Frank Luntz to engage the help of opinion, language, and technical analysts in developing themes and presentation for the trial of Amanda Marroquin suit, which went to verdict last Thursday.

The jury announced its verdict after two days of deliberation following a four-week trial in *Marroquin v. County of Los Angeles*, which was filed January 2002 in Lancaster and transferred for trial to Judge Victor Chavez in downtown Los Angeles' Stanley Mosk Courthouse.

"I thought it was a fair verdict. She has horrible injuries that'll last a lifetime," Parris told the MetNews, explaining that the accident left Marroquin suffering from chronic pain that causes her to be depressed, and facing "a lifetime of surgeries."

Marroquin, a Palmdale resident, was severely injured the day after she graduated from Paraclete High School, when she was driving a Honda Civic that broadsided a Sheriff's Department SUV making a U-turn across multiple lanes of traffic, Parris said.

The attorney explained that the county admitted liability but disputed the amount of damages, offering \$600,000 before the trial began and making a \$1 million settlement offer during trial.

Parris' trial preparation included three days of focus groups conducted by Santa Monica-based consultant Julie Fenyes, language analysis by Tom Bernthal of the L.A.-based company Jury Insight, and PowerPoint consultation by Cliff Atkinson, the attorney explained.

Parris said that Atkinson's PowerPoint techniques, coupled with streamlined themes and language, had an "extraordinary effect" on closing arguments, enabling him to make a highly persuasive presentation about the suffering Marroquin endured and will continue to face.

The closing presentation, which cost over \$60,000 to put together, focused the jury's attention by using just one word and picture per slide rather than a wordy summary of facts in bullet-form, Parris said. Rather than undercut jurors' focus on objectively analyzing legal issues, the graphic media presentation did precisely the opposite, the lawyer explained.

"The presentation kept everybody focused on what the real issues were instead of a lot of smoke and mirrors. It's important to point out that this isn't a situation of manipulation but a situation of focusing the issues," he said, adding that the visual presentation was not geared toward affecting one type of juror over another.

The eight men and eight women sitting as jurors and alternates were diverse in every respect, and the votes were 11-1 and varied throughout the special verdict form, he explained.

Parris said defense counsel did not use PowerPoint in opening or closing arguments and stipulated without complaint to his presentation after viewing it prior to trial.

"If all attorneys employed this [PowerPoint] technique across the board, trials would be a lot shorter. I think if both sides focus their issues, there would be a fair resolve," Parris commented.

He said that now that he has learned the technique, he will continue to use it on his own in the future.

In addition to Marroquin's award, the jury awarded \$1.8 to Julian Lopez of Palmdale, one of Marroquin's injured passengers. Parris said that although Lopez's attorney, Ann Smith of San Diego-based Tosdal, Smith, Steiner & Wax, did not use the same PowerPoint technique he employed, he did not think it affected the Lopez verdict.

Defense counsel Mark Weinstein and co-counsel Robert Mackey of the Los Angeles firm Veatch Huang could not be reached for comment.

Parris opined that they will certainly appeal the verdict.

"If nothing else, then the amount," he said.

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