

The Miami Herald

Family of hero wins court suit

Widow, son get \$3.8 million

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A Dade Circuit Court jury Saturday awarded \$3.8 million to the widow and son of a Metro fire fighter electrocuted while trying to save a woman trapped in a wrecked car.

The award came in a negligence suit against Florida Power & Light Company.

Fire fighter Robert Lamme, known to his friends as Casey, was killed two years ago when he touched the door of a car that Lorne Cunningham had driven into an FPL utility pole.

"Here was a guy doing a heroic act and the jury appreciated that fact," said attorney Alan Goldfarb, who represented Lamme's widow, Susan, and Eric, his 12-year-old son by a previous marriage.

"I compare it to the John Ayer situation," Goldfarb said. "Unfortunately, our guy died."

Ayer, a 34-year-old handyman, won national recognition in September when he was badly beaten while rescuing a young woman from a drunken mob in Goulds.

FPL attorney George Wright said the utility would challenge the verdict.

"We feel there were errors committed in the course of the trial," Wright said.

Wright said he knew of bigger awards against FPL in Broward County, but of none so large in Dade.

Lamme and his wife, Susan, were driving on the Palmetto Expressway one Sunday night in April 1981 when they spotted a burning car and pulled over.

Lamme ran up to the car, saw the woman inside, and tried to open the door. When he touched the car, 138,000 volts of electricity surged through his body, flinging him into the air and killing him.

Attorney Goldfarb said he based his case against FPL, in part, on the fact that utility controllers restored power to the downed line 59 seconds after the accident had taken place.

"The hot line fell into a guy wire that was wrapped around the car," Goldfarb explained. "It went dead and then by remote control from the office, it was reenergized."

Goldfarb said FPL officials testified during the six-day trial before Circuit Judge Murray Goldman that restoring power to the line was standard procedure.

"But we had experts saying that it was wrong," he added.

Goldfarb also alleged that there should have been more insulation on the guy wire and that the utility pole was too close to the roadway, arguments that were contested by FPL.

The utility's lawyer, Wright, argued that blame for Lamme's death should be placed on the driver of the wrecked car, who was drunk at the time. The woman, then 19, of Meriden, Conn., was not seriously injured.

"She was driving at 85 miles per hour and she was dead drunk," said Wright.

He said evidence presented at the trial indicated that Cunningham's blood alcohol content was .17 at the time of the crash. The legal limit for driving is .1. Three hours after the accident, Wright said, Cunningham's blood alcohol level was .14, still well over the limit.

The dead man's father, Robert Lamme Sr., said Saturday the jury award could be put to good use in paying for the education of his grandson, Eric.

"It wouldn't be wasted on that kid, he's sharp as a tack," said the grandfather. "At least something good can come out of this, though all the money in the world isn't worth losing [Casey.]"