

BURN VICTIM WINS SUIT AGAINST LANDLORD

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A civil court jury late Friday awarded \$1.5 million to a 28-year-old man who was burned over 25 percent of his body in a February 1998 apartment fire. Shane Martin was burned on his upper body, arms, neck and face. His 27-year-old fiancée, Aimee Smith, died from smoke inhalation during the early-morning blaze.

Jurors found that landlord Robert Arnold was negligent in repairing and maintaining the four-unit apartment building where Martin and Smith lived, at Rumba Lane off Ocala Road.

"We proved that the landlord had denied safe passage from the fire, and hope that this sends a message to other landlords to pay attention to the safety of tenants," said David Frank, Martin's lawyer, who tried the case with attorney Stephen Dobson.

Arnold, reached at home on Saturday, said he wished Martin the best, adding, "We have a good legal system. That was the jury's decision and it's hard to second-guess them."

Investigators never determined the cause of the blaze, and jurors found that Martin was not negligent in his actions during the fire.

According to reports, Martin initially went downstairs to try to put out the fire but came back upstairs after he got burned. He then struggled to open the bedroom window but couldn't.

Unable to break the glass, Martin dove through the window and landed on the roof, thinking Smith was behind him, reports said. Smith was later found on the bathroom floor.

Frank said Martin, now a restaurant kitchen manager in Charleston, S.C., will collect the award from Allstate, Arnold's insurer.

When the verdict came back, Martin "looked up and thanked God that someone concluded he was not at fault," Frank said. "He still feels the anguish."

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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