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Allegheny County jury awards record \$109 million to family of electrocuted Hempfield woman



Carrie Goretzka died in UPMC Mercy Hospital in Pittsburgh of burn injuries three days after being shocked. She is shown here with husband, Michael, and children Chloe (left) and Carlie at Disney World in 2009. Submitted

By **Paul Peirce**

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An Allegheny County jury Thursday afternoon awarded \$109 million, including \$61 million in punitive damages, in the death of a Hempfield woman who was electrocuted by a downed West Penn Power Co. line in her yard in 2009.

Judge Michael A. Della Vecchia said the award is the largest in Allegheny County history and likely in Western Pennsylvania.

Carrie Goretzka, 39, died of burn injuries in UPMC Mercy Hospital in Pittsburgh three days after the accident.

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The lawsuit was filed on behalf of Michael Goretzka, Carrie's husband; their two young daughters, Chloe, 8, and Carlie, 6; and Michael's mother, Joann, who saw the 7,200-volt line fall onto her daughter-in-law.

The jury deliberated only 90 minutes before returning the verdict despite mountains of evidence during the two-week trial, including multiple pieces of the downed wire and utility company logs, books and interoffice memos.

During their deliberations, jurors asked to see only three photographs taken during Carrie Goretzka's autopsy.

Juror Tina Wojton of Pittsburgh said, "There was a lot of evidence to review during the trial, but once we got back there, we spent a lot of time talking and laying out the evidence.

"It was nice to know that everyone was pretty much in agreement," she said.

Wojton said the jurors hope the \$61 million in punitive damages sends a message to utility companies to be more careful.

"None of us ever want to see something terrible like this ever happen again," she said.

Michael Goretzka hugged his attorney, Shanin Specter of Philadelphia, and wiped tears from his eyes as the verdict and penalty damages were read.

Goretzka and his mother, Joann, embraced and shook hands with each juror as the panel left the courtroom.

Specter said the size of the verdict should send a message to utility companies across the state that they should be more careful in safeguarding the public.

"It's terrible that we can't bring back Carrie, but this jury honored her memory" with the verdict, he said.

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