

\$7.1M awarded to family of teacher killed in car crash

Paul Cesarz



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LAKE COUNTY, Ind. (STMW) – The family of a popular Gary math teacher was awarded a \$7.1 million judgment stemming from her death and other injuries sustained in a 2008 car accident.

Jacquelyn Gates, who taught at Roosevelt High School, her husband and her mother, Mattie Rhenwick, now 85, of Gary, were in a minivan stopped at a red light on U.S. 30 near Columbia City when a semi-trailer rammed into the back of their minivan, which pushed their vehicle into the car in front of them. Gates died in the accident and Rhenwick suffered severe injuries including a fractured leg.

The family's attorney Kenneth J. Allen said that evidence showed that in the months before the accident, the semi driver, Justin Wallace, 25, of Meadville, Pa., had 68 emergency stops and various violations. He added that Wallace's truck was on cruise control when it hit the minivan.

The jury awarded \$5 million for the wrongful death of Gates and \$2.1 million for Rhenwick's injuries.

The verdict was against Wallace and his company, Schneider National Carriers.

"Schneider knew he'd inevitably cause a serious wreck, yet they kept him behind the wheel," Allen said in an e-mail.

"This verdict sends a clear message: big trucking companies had better closely monitor their high-risk drivers, or a jury will hold them fully accountable for the consequences," Allen said.

Gates served as the head of the math department at Roosevelt and had worked as a teacher since 1970.

Correction: A \$5 million settlement was reached prior to a jury trial in the death of Jacquelyn Gates. A jury then awarded \$2.1 million to Mrs. Mattie Rhenwick, who sustained injuries in the crash.