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Drug Patient's Award \$220,000

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A federal jury in Alexandria yesterday awarded \$220,000 in damages to a **Fairfax** County man who was detained for more than four months last year by the Florida-based drug rehabilitation agency Straight Inc.

The same jury of five men and one woman found two weeks ago that Straight had kept Fred Collins Jr., 20, against his will in both the St. Petersburg program and at the agency's new Northern Virginia facility in Springfield. Yesterday, that jury awarded Collins \$40,000 in compensatory damages and \$180,000 in punitive damages, which are intended to punish a wrongdoer. Attorneys for Straight said they will appeal.

"Fantastic," Collins said after the verdict was announced. "I'm thinking about becoming a lawyer."

Straight executive director Bill Oliver, who testified Tuesday that the nonprofit agency has a net worth of \$2.9 million, said he was surprised and "hurt" by the jury's decision.

"We didn't intend" to injure Collins, Oliver said. "We didn't think we had; obviously we didn't want to. But any reasonable person would have to look very hard at the jury's decision."

Straight clinical director Miller Newton, speaking to a rally of about 200 supporters outside Alexandria's city hall, called the verdict "unfair" and "really scary . . . It means that every time I or any other staff member tries to help a young person, we'll have to be frightened of the legal consequences."

The jury deliberated almost four hours before reporting its verdict to Judge Albert V. Bryan Jr. Jury foreman Michael A. Kibler refused to discuss deliberations, saying, "The figures speak for themselves."

Collins' attorneys had asked the jury to award compensatory damages covering three years of college tuition and living expenses, estimated at \$30,000 and \$13,000 for psychiatric therapy.

According to Collins, his father would have continued to pay for his college education if Straight staffers had not ordered Collins' parents to disown him after his escape from the program last October.

The request for punitive damages was based on what Collins' chief counsel Philip J. Hirschkop described as a "continuing pattern" of false imprisonment by Straight Inc. staffers. The jury heard testimony from former Straight clients who claimed to have been kidnaped into the program and from a Canadian man who told the jury that he made his escape from his Straight custodian during a traffic jam on the Woodrow Wilson Bridge.

Hirschkop suggested to the jury that only a settlement of "hundreds of thousands of dollars" would "hurt Straight enough" to stop them from detaining clients.

Straight's attorneys argued that whatever family and emotional problems Fred Collins has are the result of his admitted drug use as a teen-ager and are not Straight's fault.

Straight attorney Ronald L. Goldfarb told the jury that Collins, who wept during his own testimony, was "a con man, a role player" who was trying to put the blame on Straight for his family problems.

Hirschkop, in his closing argument, hammered at testimony that Miller Newton had told a 19-year-old former Straight client who refused to enroll in the program voluntarily, "I don't give a damn about your legal rights."

Hirschkop also recalled to the jury a sworn deposition by former Florida Health and Rehabilitation Services investigator Terrell Harper warning Newton about some of Straight's practices. In the deposition, which was read to the jury, Harper testified that he repeatedly told Newton that practices such as locking clients in private homes overnight and threatening recalcitrant clients with involuntary commitment to mental institutions were illegal.

Dr. James Harold Egan, head of psychiatry at Children's Hospital, testified on Collins' behalf that his imprisonment by Straight had induced a moderate chronic depression and a number of neurotic symptoms.

In Straight's defense, Dr. John Meeks of the Psychiatric Institute of Montgomery County said he believes Collins may have a personality disorder that gives him "a constant preoccupation with what other people think of him," but that it dated back to Collins' childhood and had nothing to do with his experiences with Straight.

Hirschkop and cocounsel David J. Fudala also have asked Bryan to issue a court order outlawing some of Straight's techniques. Hearings on that motion are scheduled to begin in three weeks.

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

GRAPHIC: Picture, Families of people who have been treated by Straight, Inc., demonstrate at a rally in favor of the organization at Market Square in Alexandria, by Craig Herndon -- The Washington Post

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