

Straight client wins \$721,000 suit

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Karen Norton still cries when she talks about being forbidden from seeing her dying grandfather while she was in treatment at a Straight Inc. drug rehabilitation program.

As a result of her 18-month stay at the St. Petersburg facility when she was 17, she still has nightmares, is fearful of counselors and has trouble dealing with her anger. Norton says she was battered and kept at the facility against her will.

'It's something that will affect me for the rest of my life,' Norton, 25, recently told a six-member jury.

The jurors agreed. Thursday, they awarded her \$721,000, the largest award ever against Straight Inc., said Karen Barnett, Norton's attorney.

'In theory and on paper, this place looks great,' the attorney said. 'The problem is they don't follow their own policies or procedures.'

In her lawsuit filed in 1985, Norton alleged the former director, Virgil Miller Newton, grabbed her and threw her against a wall, screamed that she no longer had 'any rights' and told her she would not be allowed to leave the facility.

Norton, who now lives in Jacksonville, said she was denied health care and once collapsed and had to be rushed to a hospital for an emergency appendectomy. She also claimed she was subject to incompetent staff members and other clients who helped control the other teen-agers in treatment.

In her most dramatic testimony during the nine-day trial, she told jurors how she was not allowed to visit her dying grandfather in Jacksonville. When he died, Norton said she was not told about it until after the funeral two weeks later.

Norton said she eventually fled the facility.

Joy Margolis, a spokeswoman for Straight Inc., which operates eight facilities nationwide, denied Norton's charges and said Straight has changed much since Norton was placed in the program by her parents eight years ago.

'The Straight program was totally different from what it is now,' she said. 'No one in current management was here in 1982.'

Margolis also said Straight since has been accredited by the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Health Care Organizations and its counselors are certified.

Barnett said jurors awarded Norton \$106,000 in compensatory damages and \$615,000 in punitive damages.

'We thought that compensatory damages were excessive and we thought the punitive damages were inexcusable. . . .' Margolis said. 'We thought it was a very unfair ruling (verdict).'

Margolis said Straight would appeal the decision to the Second District Court of Appeal in Lakeland.

Barnett conceded it likely will be several years before Norton receives the money, but noted it will collect 12 percent interest while the outcome of the appeal is pending.

'It was great,' said Barnett, who has handled three other cases against Straight. 'I just can't see where there was any (legal) error. The facts were there to support every last dollar.'

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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