

NEWS

Vanceboro woman wins \$10.75 million in lawsuit award but won't likely see much money

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A Vanceboro woman has been awarded \$10.755 million in a lawsuit against a drunk driver – possibly the largest such settlement in Craven County history.

Clara Louise Green, who was 71 at the time, was returning home on NC 43 near Weyerhauser when she was struck head-on by a speeding Charles Plunkett Jr. on March 4, 2019.

According to court documents Plunkett, a Craven County resident who lived on Washington Post Road a couple of miles from the accident site, Plunkett was drunk and driving a Mercury station wagon at “at least 90 miles per hour” according to reports as he approached a pickup truck that was driving in the same direction, toward New Bern on NC 43.

Plunkett swerved left to avoid the vehicle but sideswiped it, striking the railing of the Neuse River bridge. The car then tumbled several times before striking Green at a speed of at least 75 miles per hour.

Plunkett himself wandered from his vehicle, which burst into flames, and walked home.

Green was severely injured in the crash, with injuries including fractures in her ribs, sternum, right knee, left knee, left pelvis and open wounds on her right knee that included a degloving injury.

“Plaintiff’s injuries are permanent in nature,” the paper reads, “and she will likely suffer posttraumatic arthritis in her right ankle joint.”

“I can tell you this much: it was the most horrible day I’ve ever lived,” Green said in an interview. “I was a very happy outgoing person, and that day destroyed my entire life because of all the pain I endured.”

She initially spent 24 days in Vidant Medical Center, undergoing several surgeries, and later spent five days at Novant Presbyterian Hospital in Charlotte when bone infections cropped up.

Plunkett was sentenced to a minimum sentence of 117 months for his actions in the accident.

Through Durham attorney Carlos Mahoney, Green filed a complaint in March 2020. “Her life’s really been dramatically altered since that time,” Mahoney said of his client and added that Plunkett had no excuse for what happened. “This guy had a very substantial record of drunk driving going back 15 years,” he said.

In arguing the case Mahoney told the jury he was seeking \$255,000 for expenses and lost earnings – Green had been running a business taking care of elderly clients – and another \$2 million for pain and suffering.

“I said this in closing: he had really been a menace to the community for many years. I suggested to the jury that, one, his conduct was egregious conduct that should be subject to punitive damages, and that they really needed to send a message that this would no longer be tolerated. I suggested that an appropriate number would be \$5 million, one for each DWI.”

The jury responded by increasing the damages for lost wages, fees, and pain and suffering to \$4,255,000 and also upped the punitive award to \$6,500,000.

It is highly unlikely that Plunkett, who is still serving his sentence, will ever be able to pay it. “A huge part of it’s going to be symbolic,” Mahoney admitted.

Even so, Green feels justice has been served.

She said she has not heard any apologies from Plunkett and, when asked her thoughts about him, said, “Let’s put it this way. I don’t have a sweet tooth for him.”

She gets by, now, though she’s had to give up her job and she moves about more slowly. She tends to a garden with some help and talks a lot about her faith (an embroidered pillow beside her on the couch defines her well: “Pray more, Worry less,” it says). She keeps a vivid floral garden as a hobby.

“I truly believe God has brought me a long way,” she said. “I’m a miracle person walking around.” She said that doctors worried she wouldn’t walk again “ “there was a point they said I wouldn’t live but look at me!” she said.

Green said friends and family have brought her through, including her “very lovely daughter.

“I have a very lovely pastor who is dedicated to her people. She was very dedicated to me – very much – and to my family. I thank God for being alive.”