

Cost of Bus Mishap: \$4.5 Million

Courts: Jury quickly decides to give woman struck in crosswalk compensation from Laidlaw Transit.

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VAN NUYS — A woman who was hit by a school bus while in a pedestrian crossing lane on Ventura Boulevard deserves \$4.5 million in damages from Laidlaw Transit Inc., a jury ruled Tuesday.

Caterina Cellamare, 53, who must now walk with the aid of a cane and uses a wheelchair for shopping trips, suffered broken bones in her back, hips, legs and ankle when she was hit and knocked eight feet by the Laidlaw bus at an Encino intersection in 1995.

Jurors took less than two hours to decide the case, the trial of which lasted two weeks before Superior Court Judge Bruce J. Sottile.

"I was in a lot of pain in court, but I was very happy about the verdict and jury," Cellamare said Tuesday.

The Italian immigrant, a former Winchell's Donut employee, added that she is wracked by constant aches throughout her body and still has "nightmares about laying in the street helpless with the cars approaching me."

"She was severely injured, and Laidlaw felt sorry for the fact she was injured," Laidlaw attorney Barry Florence said. "But the law says you gotta look out for yourself whether you're in a crosswalk or not."

Florence said he was puzzled by Cellamare's refusal of Laidlaw's offer to settle the case before trial for \$4 million.

While expressing sorrow for her injuries, Florence noted that jurors found that Cellamare, who originally asked for more than \$9.9 million in damages, was 20% responsible for her injuries.

Cellamare's lawyer, Browne Greene, claimed victory.

"Jurors found that Mrs. Cellamare was severely injured and that Laidlaw was primarily responsible. Mrs. Cellamare is going to need a lifetime of medical care," Greene said.

Cellamare was headed to work at 6 a.m. on May 30, 1995, when the accident occurred, according to Greene.

She was within the crosswalk at the intersection of Ventura Boulevard and Louise Avenue when the Laidlaw bus, driven by Shirley Keltee, entered the intersection and "without seeing her, struck Mrs. Cellamare and knocked her about eight feet," Greene said.

Keltee testified that the first time she realized there was a problem was when "she heard a loud noise and felt the bus roll over something," Greene said. The driver was fired following the incident.

For Laidlaw Transit, the verdict is the latest in a history of problems, including other accidents, arrests of its drivers for drunk driving, and complaints about poor management and bad service.

Cellamare has already undergone three operations to repair her damaged body and will require four more. Still, Cellamare was sanguine Tuesday.

"I hope the future will bring good things," she said. "I'm happy to put this part of the ordeal behind us."