

DAILY REPORT

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(l-r) Matt Cook, Nathan Nicholson, and Josh Bearden, with the Cook Law Group in Gainesville. Courtesy photos

‘Very Vicious Attack’: Attorneys Secure \$5.6M Verdict in Gainesville Dog Bite Case

The jury ruled in the plaintiffs’ favor after the insurer and defendant turned down a pre-trial \$1.4 million settlement offer.

May 25, 2023

A group of Georgia plaintiff attorneys has secured a [\\$5.6 million verdict](#) for a woman viciously attacked by a dog at a neighbor’s house.

On Friday, a Hall County Superior Court jury awarded a damages verdict of \$5.6 million to the woman, Stacy Finelli, and \$20,159.99 to her husband, Anthony Finelli, for his role as caregiver during his wife’s recovery. Judge Bonnie Chesser presided. Following a five-day trial, the jury deliberated for an hour and 45 minutes before rendering a verdict in favor of the plaintiffs. After the jury ruled in the plaintiffs’ favor, it deliberated for 15 minutes before voting to allow the plaintiffs to recover \$50,000 in attorney fees from the defendants.

Matt Cook of Cook Law Group in Gainesville, one of the two lead plaintiff lawyers, said it’s the largest dog-bite verdict award in Hall County history.

“The insurer and defendant turned down an offer of [settlement] of \$1.4 million” pursuant to [OCGA 9-11-68](#), Cook said. That means the plaintiff attorneys could and did move for damages for a frivolous defense under that law, and that separately, attorney fees of up to 40% of the total verdict will be tacked on to the verdict amount because.



(L-R) Ronny Hulsey and Rustin Smith, founding partners with Smith Hulsey in Gainesville. Courtesy photos

'The Dog Repeatedly Bit [Her]'

According to the [initial complaint](#), on March 24, 2022, after Stacy Finelli a 53-year-old French teacher, received some of neighbors Thomas and Jean Steusloff's mail by mistake, she brought it to their house, and Jean Steusloff, who was home alone, invited her inside. That was when a Labrador/pit bull mix owned by the Steusloff's son, Randy, attacked Stacy Finelli.

"The dog repeatedly bit [her], grabbing her arms and legs and shaking its head, tearing [her] legs and arms open in multiple places" and bit her "on multiple parts of her body, including her face, neck, arms, hands, and legs," the complaint said.

Stacy Finelli was rushed to a local hospital and hospitalized for 10 days, out for three and then back in for nine more due to complications. Cook said her medical bills thus far have totaled more than \$336,000.

Though the dog was owned by Randy Steusloff, because it was staying at his parents' home, the jury apportioned 75% of the damages to Thomas Steusloff and 25% to Jean Steusloff, because the husband cared for the dog when home.

Of the damages verdict, co-lead plaintiff attorney Ronny Hulsey of Smith Hulsey in Gainesville said, "Two things come to mind. One is I'm sick and tired of defense attorneys and insurance companies undervaluing cases in Hall County, but that tide is turning. [Two], all too often we hear about victims in these cases, but we don't hear about victims ... getting their day in court and achieving justice."

Cook added, "I think the verdict is a statement and serves as a warning to people that want to dabble in dangerous dogs and dangerous activities, that you're playing Russian roulette with the safety of the people around you and your own exposure to liability."

Nathan Nicholson and Josh Bearden of the Cook Law Firm and Rustin Smith of Smith Hulsey also served as plaintiff attorneys.

Dog 'Exhibited Vicious Propensities'

According to the complaint, the dog had previously "exhibited vicious propensities," "aggressive behavior" and "attack-like behavior" and was "not friendly towards strangers." However, in [the defendants' response](#), they denied all those claims and said Stacy Finelli had been warned about the dog but admitted she "did not provoke the dog prior to being bit." Also, Hulsey said Thomas Steusloff had told Anthony Finelli the dog was dangerous.

"One of the things we were concerned about in the trial is the defense repeatedly pointed out that the son was the owner of the dog and the person with the most knowledge of the dog," Cook said. "But [his parents] own the house, and with ownership comes the right to say no and the duty to say no, and if something dangerous is in your home and you own it, you have to remove that

danger. We were surprised when the defense never filed a motion of intent to apportion damages to the son, especially when we got to trial and that was the large component of their defense.”

Stacy Finelli is still recovering from her injuries, Cook noted, adding the fact that she was in excellent physical shape when the attack happened has helped with her recuperation.

“She’s a lady who had run multiple full marathons, over 10 half-marathons, too many 5Ks and 10Ks to count, and just now returned to running only 30 seconds to a minute on the treadmill at a time with physical therapy,” he said. “She’s had five surgeries and has two to go. With that said, she’s made a remarkable recovery because of her vitality going into this.”

When asked what the takeaway from this case was, **Cook said, “That if you have good evidence and a good case, even conservative venues and juries will recognize and reward that.”**

Hulsey added, “I think when you do the right thing, and we’ve always tried to stay above board, and when you’re open and honest and try to treat people fairly while others try to turn things around, it ultimately catches up with them. If you’ve got good clients and good facts, if you continue to push hard enough and uncover the truth, juries in conservative venues will see through that and do the right thing.”

‘We Were Disappointed’

The Steusloffs were represented by Charles Medlin, Christina Gulas and Patrick Reames of Bovis, Kyle, Burch & Medlin in Dunwoody and Chandelle Summer of the Summer Law Firm in Gainesville, with Gulas serving as lead counsel and Reames assisting pre-trial, Medlin said.



(L-R) Charles Medlin and Christina Gulas, of Bovis, Kyle and Burch in Dunwoody. Photo by Rebecca Breyer/freelance

“We were disappointed” with the verdict, he added. “Our client had lost her husband and mother in the last year, and we felt she was not responsible for her son’s dog as it had shown no similar viciousness in the past. It was a difficult case for any jury to hear.”

Regarding a possible appeal, Medlin said the defense team is “considering all options right now.”

“We hope the plaintiff continues to recover from a tragic event that admittedly was a very vicious attack,” he added. “The damages in this case were overwhelming, and I do wish the very best for this family as they continue to recover.”