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Woman Hurt in Drunken Driving Crash Awarded \$22M

By PAUL SULLIVAN

A 27-year-old Worcester woman who suffered brain damage in a drunken-driving accident has been awarded \$22.6 million in what may be the largest personal injury award in Worcester County.

"This award sends a message that society will no longer tolerate drunk driving," said Edward C. Bassett, Jr., the attorney for victim Wendy Bloniasz of Worcester.

"Too many lives have been destroyed by drunk drivers. No amount of money can undo the damage done to Ms. Bloniasz," Bassett said.

But such a large award may be impossible to collect, said Boston lawyer J. Albert Johnson, who was not involved in the case, but called it "a Pyrrhic victory."

Bassett said he pursued the case as a promise to his client.

"We have had settlements with the bars (involved) and I promised Wendy I'd take it as far as humanly possible.

"If this young man wins the lottery, then Wendy wins the lottery. Nobody deserves it more than she does."

The defendant, John Phelan, pleaded guilty to charges of drunken driving, negligently causing serious bodily injury, leaving the scene of an accident and operating with a revoked license in connection with the May 28, 1993 accident.

Phelan was sentenced to eight to 10 years at the state prison in Walpole, but Bassett said he is now free on parole and his whereabouts are unknown.

"I remember getting thrown from the car that night. That's the last thing I remember," said Bloniasz.

"But that man shouldn't have been driving. He was drunk and he ran from the accident," Bloniasz said.

Bassett said Bloniasz was injured when she drove out of the White City parking lot in

Shrewsbury after going to a movie with several friends.

Phelan drove his car into the side of her vehicle.

Bloniasz was ejected and suffered a fractured skull.

Police investigators said Phelan admitted he had been on a drunken rage, "drinking all night" at several bars in Worcester.

The award was made by Superior Court Judge Peter Velis, who included \$15 million plus interest for the victim's traumatic injuries.

Bassett said his client is able to work 15 to 18 hours a week, but recently lost her job as a clerk in a Shrewsbury department store that went out of business.

"I am an emotional wreck because of what happened to me," said Bloniasz.

"I will never be the same again and for the rest of my life I will have what happened to me embedded in my mind what that man did to me."