

# Metro/East Jefferson

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## Fire victims win big award, but 5-year nightmare lingers

By SUSAN FINCH

Larry Latour recalls the way the nightmare started on a Sunday morning in May 1977: "My wife woke me up ... she saw fire around the light fixture.

"She yelled, 'Oh, my God,' grabbed the kids, and we jumped up, and the house exploded," says Latour.

He was remembering the instant the natural gas explosion ripped through the wood frame rental home he and his wife had helped their friends Glenn and Rose Fisher move into just the day before.

This week, nearly five years after Rose Fisher awoke, lit a cigarette and set off the odorless gas inside her new home, a Civil District Court jury awarded the people injured in the blast \$3,150,000 in damages.

The award is said to be one of the largest personal injury case judgments in the history of Orleans Parish Civil District Court.

Damages were awarded against Delta Gas Inc., which supplies natural gas in southern Plaquemines Parish; Natural Gas Odorizing Co., maker of the gas odorizing chemical the jury decided was defective, and Louise Y. Hingle, the woman who owns the house that blew up.

The jury said negligence by the landlady and the two companies caused the injuries.

Coupled with a \$2,050,000 settlement already paid them by Delta Gas and Sterling International Inc., maker of the valve controlling the flow of gas to an outlet in the house, the Fishers and the Latours stand to collect nearly \$6 million, including legal interest and costs.

The lawsuit claims Delta was negligent for failing to odorize the gas and for failing to properly connect the gas line to the residence and to properly maintain the gas line.

The suit charged the gas pipe valve inside the house was faulty, that the odorant was not properly manufactured and that landlady Hingle failed to put in the proper valve and warn her tenants about the gas leak.

Natural Gas Odorizing Co. says it will appeal the verdict, partly on grounds that Delta Gas did not use the odorizing chemical correctly.

Larry Latour says he feels that a great weight has been lifted from his shoulders, now that the trial is over.

Latour says the nearly five years of litigation have been painful for him, his wife Patricia and her children by a

previous marriage, Timothy O'Brien, now 10, and Brenda O'Brien, 12.

The family, living in a rented trailer in Lacombe, had gone to Plaquemines Parish that weekend to look for a new home.

Latour was to start heavy equipment operator school the following Monday in Lafayette.

Instead, he and Patricia and the children and the Fishers ended up in Charity Hospital in New Orleans. The youngsters, with second- and third-degree burns over 40 percent of their bodies, stayed five months.

While the children were in Charity, Larry and Patricia lived with friends because thieves stole all the furniture in their Lacombe mobile home, as well as their two cars. "We lost everything," says Latour.

After leaving Charity, the children went to a Galveston, Texas, hospital's Shrine-sponsored burn unit.

Latour's father, a Shriner, arranged for that, he says.

Latour says he and Patricia spent six months in a Galveston apartment furnished by the hospital learning how to help treat the youngsters' burns, how to give them muscle therapy and to apply their special bandages and put

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## Victims win settlement

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on the special stretch garments they have to wear.

This sort of task still must be done, and the children have to return to the Galveston Hospital every six months for more treatment, Latour says.

Both children were tutored while in the hospital, and are now in school, he reports.

After Galveston, the family lived in Plaquemines for 18 months before moving to Covington in 1981 to "get away from the rat race," says Latour, now working as an auto mechanic and home renovator.

The bulk of both the \$2,050,000 settlement and the \$3.1 million judgment is for Timothy and Brenda, according to attorney Wendell Gauthier, who along with Robert Murphy, represented the Latours and the children.

Of the \$3.1 million, the jury earmarked \$1.5 million apiece for Brenda and Timothy, \$50,000 each of the Latours and \$25,000 apiece for Mr. and Mrs. Fisher.

Two million dollars of the \$2,050,000 settlement has gone to the children, for whom the money is being kept in a trust fund, Gauthier said. The rest was equally shared by the Latours and the Fishers, he said.



FAMILY TALKS ABOUT FIRE — Timothy O'Brien Latour, 9, left, Larry and Patricia Latour, and Brenda Ann Latour, 12, talk about the tragic natural gas fire and explo-

—Staff photo by Lionel Cottier  
sion that occurred at their friends' home in Plaquemines, May 1977.