

The “Hot Coffee Case” The Big Windfall (Part Four)

Ask anyone how much money the jury awarded Ms. Stella Liebeck (the “hot coffee case” victim) and you will hear anything



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from “\$2 million” to “\$20 million” to “way too much money for the simple inconvenience of spilling coffee in your lap”. If you ask the same individuals how much money would it take for them to undergo the pain associated with third degree burns to their inner thighs, perineum, buttocks, genital and groin areas—all of which required hospitalization for 8 days and surgical skin grafts, the question becomes much harder to answer. When you consider that Ms. Liebeck’s injuries could have been avoided altogether by lowering the temperature of the coffee, it becomes even more complex of a question.

The “so called” Big Windfall Jury Award: The jury awarded Ms. Liebeck \$200K in compensatory damages. It was reduced by the judge to \$160K because Ms. Liebeck was found to be 20% at fault. The jury also awarded \$2.7 million in punitive damages—equaling just 2 days of McDonald’s coffee sales.

The judge reduced the punitive award to \$480K—or three times the compensatory award. The parties entered into a post-verdict settlement.

What did Ms. Liebeck’s lawsuit accomplish: Post-verdict investigation found that the temperature of coffee at the local Albuquerque McDonalds had dropped to 158 degrees Fahrenheit.

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