

## HARRIS MUST PAY \$3.75 MILLION



**FAMILIAR TERRITORY:** Clara Harris and her attorney, Dean Blumrosen, listen to the jury's verdict granting her in-laws millions Friday.

### RUNNING THE NUMBERS

Here's how the jury broke down the judgment for Gerald and Mildred Harris:

#### Pecuniary loss

- Sustained in the past: \$0.00
- Reasonable probability in the future: \$750,000

#### Loss of companionship

- Sustained in the past: \$500,000
- Reasonable probability in the future: \$500,000

#### Mental anguish

- Sustained in the past: \$1 million
- Reasonable probability in the future: \$1 million



**AFTER THE VERDICT:** Gerald and Mildred Harris of Pearland said they wanted the world to hear that their son was a "good man." "The jury heard our story and returned an equitable decision," Gerald Harris said.

■ Her in-laws call award 'closure,' but whether they will ever collect it is uncertain

By RUTH RENDON and DALE LEZON  
HOUSTON CHRONICLE

Clara Harris, the Friendswood dentist convicted of running over her husband after finding him with his mistress, must pay her in-laws \$3.75 million for their pain and suffering.

Whether Gerald and Mildred Harris of Pearland will ever collect the judgment awarded Friday is questionable. Their attorneys said they will ask for Clara Harris' financial records.

Jurors in state District Judge David J. Bernal's court deliberated 10 hours over two days before reaching the unanimous verdict Friday afternoon.

The decision closes another chapter in the sensational case

that drew international attention.

The Harrises filed the wrongful-death lawsuit against their daughter-in-law for loss of companionship, mental anguish and loss of financial support. They said their son, David, a successful Clear Lake-area orthodontist, had promised to provide for them financially as they aged.

The Harrises, who had stood by their daughter-in-law during her criminal trial, asked for about \$5 million. Attorney Joe Stephens had asked jurors to award the couple \$2 million each for their loss of companionship and mental anguish and about \$720,000 to cover the cost of retirement care for 10 years, should the couple need it.

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For a photo gallery on the wrongful-death lawsuit against Clara Harris, visit [chron.com/houston](http://chron.com/houston)

## HARRIS: Some jurors sympathetic to all parties

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"The jury heard our story and returned an equitable decision," said a choked-up Gerald Harris, 77, a retired school administrator. "We got to tell the world that our son, David, was a good man. And this gives closure on the whole situation."

Mildred Harris, 73, a retired school secretary, stood next to her husband outside the 281st District Courtroom at the Harris County Civil Courthouse but declined to comment.

Clara Harris is serving a 20-year sentence after she was convicted of murder in February 2003 for running over her husband with her Mercedes-Benz the evening of July 24, 2002 — an evening on which David Harris had promised her he would end his affair.

Dean Blumrosen, Clara Harris' attorney, said his client did not want to go to trial.

"She tried to avoid the case," he said, explaining that she did not want her in-laws to relive the pain they suffered from their son's death.

Blumrosen contended the case materialized after Clara Harris told Gerald and Mildred Harris that she did not want her brother-in-law, Gerald Harris Jr., and his girlfriend, Barbara Twigg, to live in her home. Court testimony showed that Gerald Harris Jr. was married at the time.

"She didn't want Gerald Harris Jr. and Barbara Twigg raising her children," Blumrosen said. The Harrises did not see a problem with their oldest son helping rear the boys.

At the time, the grandparents, along with Clara Harris, had custody of Clara and David

Harris' 4-year-old twin boys.

Before the verdict was read, Clara Harris, who was wearing an orange Harris County Jail-issued jump suit, sat next to Blumrosen with eyes cast down. On occasion she would look toward her in-laws sitting across the room next to their attorneys, as if trying to make eye contact. Clara Harris' eyes followed them as they left the courtroom. Gerald and Mildred Harris did not look toward her.

"We're pleased we got to tell David's story," attorney Richard Howell said. "We wanted to show David's life was not in vain."

### Determining negligence

Jurors determined that Clara Harris murdered her husband of 10 years and was negligent, as were Blue Moon Investigations and Nassau Bay Hilton Hotel.

Clara Harris had hired Blue Moon, a private detective agency, to spy on her husband. The evening of July 24, 2002, Clara Harris and her 16-year-old stepdaughter, Lindsey, had been looking for David Harris. That evening, a representative from Blue Moon called Clara Harris to say her husband was at the Hilton Hotel, court testimony has shown.

Clara Harris was found to be 80 percent responsible for her husband's death, while Blue Moon and the Hilton were 17 percent and 3 percent responsible, respectively.

Testimony showed that hotel employees broke up a fight between Clara Harris and Gail Bridges, her husband's mistress and employee at his orthodontic office, but erred in not keeping the parties at the hotel until po-



CARLOS ANTONIO RIOS: CHRONICLE

**ANTICIPATION:** Clara Harris waits for the jury's decision. Afterwards, the Harrises wanted to meet with her, but courthouse rules would not allow it.

lice arrived.

Under the law, however, since Clara Harris was found to be more than 50 percent responsible, she is liable for the entire award granted by the jury, Howell said.

Howell said he will go about trying to determine what assets Clara Harris has.

In his will, David Harris named his wife as sole beneficiary. A Galveston County probate court approved a settlement of the estate, with each of his children getting about \$2 million and Clara Harris retaining about \$1.2 million in assets.

Part of those assets included the couple's Friendswood home, which county records showed was valued at \$725,330. The couple owed \$540,000 on it. Clara Harris also got to keep \$160,000 in a retirement account and a Lake Livingston home valued at about \$130,000. She has since sold both homes to pay legal expenses.

Howell said his clients would be able to collect on Clara Har-

ris' future earnings, such as from a book or movie deal.

After the verdict, four jurors spoke to the media about the grueling decision to determine damages. Jurors said it was easy to determine the award for the Harrises' future care but more difficult to place an amount on mental anguish and loss of their son's companionship.

"When it got to trying to place a dollar figure on a life, I think it was the most difficult part," said juror Brandon Pauler, who expressed some sympathy for everyone involved, including Clara Harris.

"Obviously," he said, "she has gone through a lot as well. It's not just Mr. and Mrs. Harris who have suffered."

### 'She could have stopped'

Lorna Mullens, the jury forewoman, said she was somewhat sympathetic toward Clara Harris but realized Harris was responsible for her husband's death. "I guess what I arrived at is she could have stopped. And she didn't stop," she said. "She kept running over him. She could have stopped after she hit him the first time."

After the verdict was read, the Harrises wanted to meet with their daughter-in-law but jail rules did not allow for such a visit at the courthouse.

"It was going to be just the three of them. No attorneys," Blumrosen said. "They have a strong bond. They all show a strong bond and love for David. I hope that through time Clara, Gerald and Mildred can heal and come back together again."

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