

Jury awards \$5.6 million to Gainesville High teacher in dog mauling case



Stacy Finelli

A Hall County jury returned a \$5.6 million verdict for a Gainesville High teacher in what her attorneys have called one of the worst dog attacks they've seen, according to court documents.

The jury awarded Stacy Finelli \$5.6 million and her husband, Tony Finelli, \$20,159, after a weeklong trial before Superior Court Judge Bonnie Oliver.

Her attorneys say it is one of the biggest amounts awarded ever in Hall County from a dog bite case.

Stacy Finelli [walked March 24, 2022](#), over to her neighbors, the Steusloffs, on Hawthorne Lane in

Gainesville to give them mail that was misdelivered. Her attorneys [wrote in the original complaint](#) that the dog, a labrador/pit bull mix, "clamped its teeth into and violently shook" Stacy Finelli's body.

"Judging by the photos, to us it looked more like a shark attack than a dog attack," attorney Rustin Smith previously told The Times.

Attorney Matt Cook described the dog as a "ticking time bomb that should have been dealt with long before our client was savagely attacked."

"Five out of six visits to the veterinary office, two different offices said that he had aggression problems," Cook said.



(Counterclockwise from top left)

Nathan Nicholson, Josh Bearden,
and Matt Cook

The \$5.6 million verdict was awarded late Friday, May 19, with 75% of the damages apportioned to Thomas Steusloff and 25% to Jean Steusloff.

The jury also awarded \$50,000 in attorneys' fees for the Finellis.

In the Steusloffs' motion for summary judgment, the Steusloffs' son came to live with his parents and brought his dog Bronson, a lab/pit bull mix.

The Steusloffs' attorneys wrote that the dog had never been aggressive or attacked anybody.

"Bronson was a playful dog who would sometimes jump on people, but without biting them," the defense wrote while mentioning two instances where the dog jumped on older women.

Tom Steusloff and his son were not at home March 24, 2022 when Finelli knocked on the door to hand her neighbor a large stack of mail misdelivered to the Finellis' home, according to the defense's motion.

After talking for 20-40 minutes on the porch, Jean Steusloff invited Stacy Finelli to see the renovated master bedroom.

"Jean heard Bronson run down the hall, and Jean 'tried to protect Stacy,'" according to the defense's motion. "The next thing Jean remembers is Stacy and herself laying on the floor next to each other, and Stacy telling her to call 911. Jean put Bronson in the garage and then called 911."

The dog was put down by the Steusloffs.

The defense argued the Steusloffs were not liable because they did not know the dog had the propensity to attack others.

Tom Steusloff, who died last year, also was not the owner or keeper of the dog, the attorneys wrote.

Oliver denied the motion for summary judgment. Oliver's order referenced depositions showing that the Steusloffs were present when another person was allegedly bitten by the dog.

"The court is not aware of any evidence that the plaintiff was aware of the vicious propensity of the dog in question but merely aware of the dog's existence," the judge wrote.

The attorneys for the Finellis said the jury saw through these arguments, as the jurors awarded \$50,000 in attorneys' fees for a "frivolous defense."

"This happened because the defendants refused to accept responsibility in this case and simply blamed the dog," attorney Ronny Hulsey said. "There was no responsible dog ownership in this situation."

Stacy Finelli is still in physical therapy. She has endured five surgeries with still two more to go, her attorneys said.

“She went from running multiple marathons in her life, multiple 10Ks, to now being able to just now run about 30 seconds to one minute at a time on a treadmill,” Cook said.

Cook and Hulsey felt that the defense tried to cast Finelli in a negative light and “make Stacy a victim twice.”

“I think the jury placed a lot of emphasis on what may have been taken from her and what it was going to take to try to make this lady whole,” Hulsey said.

The attorneys said there was insurance coverage in the case, but they added they were not at liberty to say if there were any caps related to the verdict.

The Times reached out to two members of the defense team for comment, but those requests were not returned. The Finellis were represented by Cook, Hulsey, Nathan Nicholson and Josh Bearden.



Ronny Hulsey and Rustin Smith