

Fireworks suit settled as jury selection set to begin

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FORT WORTH - A lawsuit brought by a woman severely burned in a 1998 fire at a Tarrant County fireworks plant was settled Thursday just before jury selection was to begin.

The suit, brought by Beronica Gomez, 32, of Azle had sought \$10 million in damages. The amount and terms of the settlement were confidential.

Gomez and her husband, Jerry, declined to comment. Their attorney, Geno Borchardt, of Fort Worth called the settlement "satisfactory to all parties."

The suit was filed against Pyrotech, operator of a fireworks display company in the 6600 block of Nine Mile Azle Road in northwest Tarrant County.

"Obviously, Pyrotech is pleased the case is settled," said David Sargent, whose firm of Hermes Sargent Bates represented the company.

Gomez was one of two women injured in an explosion the morning of July 10, 1998. The other woman suffered only minor injuries.

According to reports at the time, the women were among six employees dismantling fireworks that were not used at four Independence Day celebrations that had been canceled because of rain.

The owner of the plant said at the time that the fireworks had become wet and that the moisture made them unstable.

The 4,000-square-foot metal building was destroyed. The blast was heard a mile away.

A similar explosion and fire destroyed another building five days earlier, and that point was central to the plaintiff's case. No one was injured in that incident.

"Because another explosion occurred just five days earlier, Pyrotech acted irresponsibly in forcing the workers to continue dismantling the fireworks," Borchardt said in a statement.

The suit claimed that the building was unsafe in that it was filled with flammable materials and did not have enough exits.

"She [Gomez] was trapped inside a dangerous, burning building, and it is miraculous that she survived," Borchardt said.

He said Gomez suffered third-degree burns over a third of her body, resulting in disfigurement, many surgeries and emotional trauma.

The case was to have been heard in 141st District Court. Jurors were waiting outside the courtroom as lawyers and litigants reached the agreement.

Negotiations had been under way since September.