

Jury Awards \$1.8M to Family in Police Death

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A Glendale jury has awarded nearly \$1.8 million in a wrongful death case brought by the family of a man shot to death by an off-duty Los Angeles police officer.

After a three-week trial the Los Angeles Superior Court jury returned its verdict Wednesday, blaming the LAPD for returning the officer's gun to him after he had severely beaten his estranged wife and threatened her with the weapon.

Officer Victor Ramos, 29, killed himself after shooting his 27-year-old wife, Melba, and Gregory Thomas to death in her Glendale apartment the night of Aug. 12, 1992, a few months after the beating incident. The couple's three children remained in the apartment, physically unharmed, until police forced entry the next morning.

The wrongful death lawsuit was filed in October 1992 by Thomas' widow, Orleatha, and two children, ages 10 and 7, on the grounds that the LAPD, rather than treating or punishing Ramos, returned him to active duty and gave him back his gun.

"This case is about two basic issues — first, the police failing to deal effectively with spousal abuse; and, second, the police 'code of silence,'" said Beverly Hills attorney Gregory A. Yates, who represented the plaintiffs.

"It was Mrs. Thomas' belief that her husband would not have been killed had the LAPD followed their own rules for dealing with Ramos' domestic abuse," he said. "It was obvious by his actions that Victor Ramos was a danger to himself and the public. And yet the LAPD not only failed to help this emotionally disturbed officer, but they also provided him with the [instrument] that caused the deaths."

However, during five days of deliberation the Glendale jury divided the blame, attaching 23 percent

negligence to the LAPD, 43 percent to Ramos, 20 percent to his slain wife, and 12 percent to Thomas, the third victim. The jury also blamed plaintiff Orleatha Thomas for 2 percent of the negligence.

Deputy City Attorney Victor Schulte, who represented the LAPD, said Thursday that, given the way the jury viewed the case, he was grateful only 23 percent of the negligence was attached to the department. The LAPD is not responsible for the 43 percent negligence attributed to Victor Ramos, he added.

Orleatha Thomas had been warned repeatedly that her husband was having an affair with Melba Ramos and could be risking danger, Schulte said.

The officer, who was assigned to West Los Angeles, became enraged over the apparent affair between his wife and 39-year-old Gregory Thomas, a trainer at a Hollywood health club.

During the trial, Yates said, police testified that allegations Ramos had hit, kicked, punched, pulled out clumps of his wife's hair and pointed a gun at her during the May 1992 beating were not mentioned in the report filed by investigating officers.

The defense argued that the department was not responsible for Ramos' actions while off duty and drunk.

"They felt we should have done a lot more when we took his gun away," Schulte said Thursday. "But we had no indication he had any inclination to do anything."

Superior Court Judge Charles W. Stoll ruled at the start of the case that the LAPD had discretion to seize Ramos' gun.

"The question was whether we did enough," Schulte said. "The jury felt that if they had pointed a gun at someone they would have been arrested, and we didn't arrest him."

The department instead advised Ramos to seek marriage counseling, which he attended only once.