

## Hancock Jury awards \$1.29M verdict in first trial in district since pandemic began

BY GEOFF BELCHER  
GENERAL MANAGER

A Hancock County jury on Saturday awarded a \$1.29 million verdict to a man who was severely injured in a hit-and-run accident three years ago.

It was the first courtroom trial in the district — and reportedly the first civil courtroom trial in the state — since the coronavirus pandemic

began.

“That was the first jury trial we’ve had in our circuit court district since COVID began,” Hancock Circuit Court Clerk Kendra Necaie said Monday. “In compliance with orders from the (MS) Supreme Court, we have continued circuit court throughout the pandemic. This has been done by following CDC guidelines, with social distancing, masks, temperature checks and videoconference technologies.”

Circuit Judge Lisa Dodson presided over the week-long trial, which wrapped up on Saturday.

The plaintiff, Michael Brandner, Sr., was injured April 14, 2017 when the vehicle he was driving was hit by a van owned by Golconda Holdings, LLC, and driven by Trevor Lykins.

Brandner, a medical technician in a heart surgery hospital in Baton Rouge, was stopped at a red light at the intersection of Washington Street and Hwy. 90 in Bay St. Louis at around 4:15 a.m. on April 14, 2017 when the collision occurred.



• See VERDICT/  
Page 4

### • VERDICT

Continued  
from Page 1

Brandner was represented at trial by Bay St. Louis attorney Brehm Bell and Gulfport attorney David Pitre.

“The driver of the van fled the scene,” Bell said. “Weeks later, through the efforts of the Bay St. Louis Police Department, the Hancock County Sheriff’s Office and the MS Department of Homeland Security, a photo lineup was prepared and the absent driver was identified. This began the long legal battle, concluding with this trial three years later. During this time, the wounded driver endured two spinal surgeries and has more medical procedures to follow in his future.”

“One of the amazing things about the entire process was the extreme efforts taken by the Hancock County Circuit Court to accommodate the trial and keep everyone safe,” Bell said.

Bell and Pitre said everyone in the courthouse wore masks the entire time unless they were engaged in argument from the podium or examination of witnesses.

“Non-contact forehead temperature checks were conducted by security every time anyone entered the only public entrance,” Bell said, and anyone with an elevated temperature was not allowed in.”

Sterile masks and hand sanitizer were provided, and testifying witnesses were presented sterile plexiglass face shields.

“Every night, the courtroom was cleaned and sterilized by the courthouse staff,” Bell said. “All jurors wore personal masks and physical dis-

tancing was strictly enforced.”

“I’ve never studied eyes in a trial so much in my life,” Pitre said, “as that was the only facial feature we could see.”

“Kendra Necaie, Hancock County circuit clerk, and her staff are to be commended,” Bell said. “It was through their efforts and the efforts of Judge Lisa Dodson’s staff that this jury trial was able to be held. It was the general feeling of all involved that despite the challenges presented by COVID, the wheels of justice must continue.”

Bell said that if the case had not gone forward this month due to the pandemic, it would have not made it back to the court docket until August 2021.

“I am so thankful that our client was finally vindicated,” Pitre said. “The jurors looked past the arguments by the insurance companies, focused on the facts, and determined that our client was legitimate and so were his claims.”

Bell said that as lead attorney, Pitre had to battle through more than 270 court pleadings. Bell joined the case as local counsel in the final preparations and during the trial, he said.

“The insurance companies spent thousands of dollars on attorneys and experts to challenge the claims for medical bills and losses suffered due to the wrongful actions of the hit-and-run driver,” Bell said.

The jury deliberated only about an hour-and-a-half on Saturday before rendering its verdict, Necaie said.

Brandner was awarded \$500,000 for past, present or future physical pain and suffering, mental anguish, emotional distress and loss of enjoyment of life; \$300,000 for past medical expenses; and \$492,909 for future medical expenses.