

## Man Convicted Of Killing 7 Awarded Nearly \$500K

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#### **News**

Posted by : Randy

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CHICAGO (AP) -- A former handyman serving life in prison for the 1993 murder of seven people at a suburban Chicago restaurant has been awarded nearly a half-million dollars in a civil lawsuit in which he alleged a jail guard punched him in the face.



Victims' relatives Sunday criticized jurors' decision for James Degorski, who, with an accomplice, shot and stabbed two restaurant owners and five workers at Brown's Chicken and Pasta during a botched robbery. Their bodies were found in a walk-in cooler and freezer.

Degorski, now 41, accused a Cook County Jail guard of punching him and breaking his cheekbone and eye socket in 2002 - just after Degorski's arrest in what had been one of the most notorious, unsolved murder cases in Illinois history.

"If broken bones are worth a half-million, then how much are seven lives worth? This just doesn't feel right," said Ann Ehlenfeldt, a sister of Richard Ehlenfeldt, one of the owners who was killed.

But Degorski's attorney, Jennifer Bonjean, hailed the jury's decision, which came Friday after a three-day trial.

"I think it's a beautiful day for civil rights when a jury can put aside emotions and say we are all entitled to our civil rights," she said. "It's about protecting the constitutional rights of the least among us."

Despite the \$451,000 award, it's not clear whether Degorski will ever see any of the money.

Prison officials could seek to seize it to cover costs of imprisoning Degorski at the Menard Correctional Center, southeast of St. Louis, Bonjean said. The cost of keeping a defendant at that prison is around \$20,000 a year, according to data from the Illinois Department of Corrections.

And even if the money technically becomes his, Degorski would face strict limits on how much he could spend. Typically, inmates at state prisons are barred from spending more than a few hundred dollars a month at prison commissaries.

The guard accused of beating Degorski, former Cook County sheriff's deputy Thomas Wilson, may file an appeal, his attorney, John Winters Jr., said. Winters said he may look for other legal means to ensure Degorski never gets the money.

"I will try to get every dime back out of Mr. Degorski," he said.

Winters said he thought U.S. District Judge Robert Dow, who presided over the civil trial, was wrong to rule jurors could not be told any details of the restaurant killings.

Prosecutors have said Degorski and his high school friend, Juan Luna, committed the murders during a robbery that netted them less than \$2,000. Luna has also been sentenced to life in prison.

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"We were only allowed to say he (Degorski) was convicted of murder. ... It wasn't explained to them how vicious this guy was," Winters said about jurors in the civil case.

That was relevant, he added, because his client did know during the 2002 incident about the chilling allegations against Degorski and believed he needed to be aggressive in subduing him.

"Officer Wilson knew who this guy was," Winters said. "So when he was attacked, he was going to respond in kind. We believe this was a case of self-defense."

The jury said Degorski should get \$225,000 in compensatory damages, which is the amount Cook County must pay, attorneys said; \$226,000 in punitive damages would have to be paid by Wilson.

"The system effectively took the shackles on Mr. Degorski and hid what he really is, and put the shackles on my client," Winters said.