

# Ford not liable for trooper's death, passenger's injury



AP photo

**Shonnie Newton, center, widow of highway patrol Trooper Michael Newton, reacts to the verdict yesterday in the case against Ford Motor Co. and Trade Winds Distributing at the Jackson County Courthouse in Independence.**

KANSAS CITY (AP) — A Kansas City jury yesterday found that Ford Motor Co. wasn't liable in the May 2003 death of a Missouri State Highway Patrol trooper when his Crown Victoria was struck from behind and caught fire.

Jurors said the guilty parties were the driver of the pickup truck that slammed into trooper Michael Newton's patrol car and the driver's employer, Trade Winds Distributing Inc. of Altamont. They awarded \$8.5 million in damages to Newton's family and a passenger in the patrol car who was severely burned.

The passenger, Michael Nolte, is a former Columbia resident who now owns a bridal salon in Overland Park, Kan.

The victims' families actually will get

about \$500,000 each, minus lawyer fees. A pretrial settlement had capped Trade Winds' liability at near \$1 million, said its owner, Denny Strein. If Ford had been found guilty it would have been responsible for the rest of the jury's award.

"My family is stunned by the verdict," Nolte told the Kansas City Star yesterday.

The Star reported that Nolte and his wife had sought about \$45 million in damages. The jury awarded him \$4 million and his wife \$500,000. Instead, they will get about half of the almost \$1 million in Trade Winds' insurance money. Much of this will go to his lawyers, Nolte said.

"I have a wife who loves me unconditionally, burned or unburned," he said, adding that he also has three daughters at

home, a career he loves and many friends.

"I thank God that I am alive to deliver this statement to the media."

In a 2003 letter to the Tribune, Nolte said he lived in Columbia from 1980 to 1993. In the letter he praised the staff of University Hospital, saying he was in the hospital's care for 65 days.

Attorneys for Newton's family and Nolte had argued that the design of the Crown Victoria, with the fuel tank between the rear bumper and the rear axle, contributed to the explosion.

Police agencies across the country have made similar claims after explosions involving the popular model of patrol car.

The automaker has repeatedly maintained that the Crown Victoria is safe.

In this case, investigators with the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration last year said the gas tank of Newton's patrol car didn't appear compromised. They said the fire came after fuel leaked from the severed fuel supply tube, which could come loose in rear-end crashes involving any vehicle.

Newton, 25, pulled over Nolte, of Overland Park, Kan., on May 22, 2003, on Interstate 70 near Odessa. Newton and Nolte were in the trooper's car, which was parked along the eastbound shoulder, when it was struck by a Ford F-350 truck driven by Paul Daniel of New Hampton while he looked for his sunglasses.

Newton burned to death. Nolte was severely burned over half of his body.