

LOCAL

Jury awards woman \$65,000 for enduring sexual harassment from a co-worker

By Elizabeth Brixey
Courts reporter

A former Madison machine operator was awarded \$65,000 in damages for sexual harassment she endured on the job and for being fired when she complained to supervisors.

After 3½ hours of deliberation late Thursday, Dane County jurors decided that 33-year-old Mary Adams was sexually harassed by a co-worker at Universal Presentation Concepts, 1501 S. Sloughton Road. UPC makes plastic displays and store displays.

The jury also decided:

■ The company failed to take prompt and reasonable measures to stop sexual harassment of Adams after supervisors knew about it.

■ The company retaliated against Adams for complaining about the harassment.

■ The company intentionally discriminated against Adams on the basis of her gender when it fired her.

■ Both failing to stop the harassment and firing Adams were done with reckless indifference.

'(The jury) clearly sent the message that companies have to take sexual harassment seriously.'

Amy Scarr
lawyer for Mary Adams

On Friday, Adams said she was "overwhelmed and speechless" by the verdicts. "I was really thankful that the jury saw the truth and that they came to a fair decision."

Jurors reached their decisions after a four-day trial before Circuit Judge Paul Higginbotham.

They awarded Adams \$15,000 for the emotional harm, distress, humiliation and embarrassment she suffered while on the job from November 1995 to August 1996.

And they awarded her \$50,000 in punitive damages, which are intended to punish defendants for

their conduct.

Adams' lawyer, Amy Scarr, had asked the jury for \$25,000 in punitive damages and was somewhat taken aback by their decision.

"This jury sent a powerful message to this defendant by doubling the amount of punitive damages," Scarr said Friday. "They clearly sent the message that companies have to take sexual harassment seriously."

Adams maintained that in late 1995, co-worker John Poster began making sexual advances and comments to her as she worked alone on a machine that folded plastic

into greeting card displays. She tried to handle the co-worker herself, sometimes reaching the point of swearing at him.

Scarr told the jury that in February 1996, she complained to her supervisors and they promised they would talk with the man and order him to stay out of her department.

But Scarr said the behavior continued and the next month, Adams — who, by this time, said she was starting to feel like she was being stalked — put her com-

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plaint in writing.

Just over a week later, she was fired on the grounds that she was a problem employee who couldn't get along with her co-workers. Scarr said Adams' personnel file contained one supervisor's memo about such problems, and that memo was placed there only a few days before she was fired and she didn't know about it.

UPC's lawyer, Harry Van Camp, argued that Adams was a moody, difficult employee who was having an affair with the co-worker. He said that when Adams reported sexual harassment, the company took her seriously and monitored the situation. He said that they found no evidence of harassment and that Poster denied behaving improperly.

Van Camp said Adams agreed

to be fired after she told her supervisor she was so unhappy she wished she could quit but couldn't because she wouldn't get unemployment.

Van Camp was out of the state Friday and couldn't be reached for comment on the possibility of appeal. Neither could company officials.

Adams urged people who think they are being sexually harassed to "document every detail immediately. Keep copies, records of everything, and always be aware of the policies at your place of employment."

Sexual harassment trials are rare in Dane County Circuit Court; they usually settle before they get to trial or they end up in federal court.