

PSL HIGH'S EX-CLERK WINS DEFAMATION SUIT

Author: Jason Geary staff writer

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FORT PIERCE - A former Port St. Lucie High School clerk has been awarded \$500,000 in a defamation lawsuit against a mother and daughter who spread false accusations that she supplied drugs and alcohol to students at an after-prom party in 1996.

Suzanne **Akerley**, 42, filed a lawsuit in 1999 against Barbara Francis and her daughter, Julie, for making the statements. On Friday, a jury awarded **Akerley** compensatory damages but not punitive damages.

"She was very pleased and, basically - what she said was - 'Strangers finally believed me,'" said **Akerley's** attorney, Stuart M. Address of Stuart.

"She was looking to vindicate herself so she could walk around the community with her head held high," Address said.

The lawsuit alleged that school aide Barbara Francis and her daughter, Julie, made false and defamatory statements against **Akerley**, including allegations that she gave illegal drugs and alcohol to students, smoked marijuana with them, had improper intimate relationships with them and permitted them to have sex in her home.

The lawsuit stated that the accusations injured **Akerley's** business reputation and subjected her "to scorn, ridicule, pain, embarrassment, humiliation, mental anguish, shame, hurt feelings and inability to lead a normal life."

Akerley and her family no longer live in St. Lucie County.

"It's been a long road and I'm so relieved it's finally over," **Akerley** said in a prepared statement. "I was in every newspaper and on every television station being accused of something I didn't do, and now I hope everyone will know the truth."

Dale Buckner of West Palm Beach, an attorney who represented Barbara and Julie Francis, verified the verdict but declined to comment further Monday.

Akerley was formerly a clerk in the dean's office, and Julie Francis was a student at the school.

Many of the allegations stemmed from an after-prom party at the **Akerley** household in May 1996.

Arrest reports stated that **Akerley** and her husband had invited some students to their home, but some came early and brought beer. The Akerleys arrived home and tried to run off the students who brought the alcohol, reports stated.

Barbara and Julie Francis did not begin discussing the after-prom party allegations until months later, in February 1997, when **Akerley** ended a friendship with Julie Francis, Address said.

He said they made their accusations with "bad faith or ill motives" intended to harm **Akerley**.

Akerley was arrested on five counts of contributing to the delinquency of a minor stemming from the prom party, arrest reports indicate. In February 1998, the State Attorney's Office dropped all charges against **Akerley**.

After her arrest, **Akerley** was transferred to an office position at the school district and was later suspended without pay. She filed notice against the school district but later resigned for an undisclosed cash settlement in 2001.