

Woman awarded \$518,988 from pit bull attack

Michael Cabanatuan, Chronicle Staff Writer

Wednesday, March 21, 2007

(03-21) 22:01 PDT -- A San Francisco jury on Wednesday awarded more than a half million dollars to a woman mauled by a pit bull as she walked through the Mission District in December 2005.

Jurors awarded \$518,988 to Susan Hertzfeldt, 38, of San Francisco, who was bitten in the face by one of two pit bulls loosely tied to a light post at 22nd and Mission streets. She suffered a severe laceration to the mouth that required plastic surgery and caused permanent scarring and nerve damage, said John Hullverson, one of her attorneys.

The award, he said, should make people think hard before they keep pit bulls as pets -- and make it clear that they will be held responsible for their dog's behavior.

"If you're going to own one, you better understand that there are problems with these dogs, and you are going to be held accountable for any injuries they cause," he said. "Hopefully, this will prevent these kinds of attacks from happening again."

According to Hullverson, the two pit bulls, Bogart and Bitsy, had been involved in earlier incidents, including an attack on another dog, and had been declared "vicious and dangerous" by San Francisco Animal Care and Control. But in order to keep the dogs from being put to death, Bonnie Weinstein, one of the owners of the dogs, vowed to keep them leashed and muzzled in public, Hullverson said.

Weinstein could not be reached for comment Wednesday night.

Three weeks after Weinstein promised to keep the dogs muzzled and secured, her son, John Gould, left them loosely tied to a light post while he visited a fast food restaurant, Hullverson said. The pit bulls attacked Hertzfeldt as she walked past, he said, and one of the dogs, Bogart, lunged at her face, ripping away a piece of her lip. After the attack, Gould fled with the dogs, and was apprehended 10 blocks away, Hullverson said. The jury found that Weinstein "failed to exercise reasonable care" of the dogs, resulting in the injuries to Hertzfeldt. Their verdict awarded \$18,988 in medical expenses and \$500,000 for physical pain, disfigurement and mental suffering.