

\$1M verdict against Belvedere

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A Baltimore jury has awarded \$1 million to a Baltimore County speech language pathologist who fell down a flight of stairs, breaking her pelvis and wrist, during her bachelorette party at the Belvedere hotel in November 2007.

After a week considering the case against the **Belvedere Restaurant Group**, which operates the historic Mt. Vernon hotel's "13th Floor" bar, the panel decided Monday afternoon that Lillian Blank, 52, deserved \$59,646 for her medical expenses, \$44,694 for her past lost income, and \$895,660 for her pain and suffering — exactly \$1 million total.

The jury's careful math was reduced to \$791,935.70, however, in keeping with the state's cap on non-economic damages and the actual medical bills submitted in the case, according to Joseph B. Espo, Blank's attorney.

While the corporate defendant was eventually found liable for Blank's painful injuries, her alcohol consumption on that evening of celebration-turned-catastrophe was "a lively issue" at last week's trial before Baltimore City Circuit Judge W. Michel Pierson, Espo said.

"My view of it is, whether it was two drinks or four drinks, it is not negligent to have drinks in a bar,"

Espo, of **Brown, Goldstein & Levy LLP**, said Tuesday. "That's what they're there for. She had a ride there; she had a ride home. It's not as though she got drunk and got into a car and went off and injured somebody."

"The negligence was in having an unlit staircase with a dark rope hidden across the top of it," Espo said.

No one answered at the number listed for the defendant, and its lawyer, Mark D. Palmer of **Bacon, Thornton & Palmer LLP**, did not return calls Tuesday. Espo said the parties met for a day of mediation last month but could not reach an agreement, leading to the trial that began with opening arguments last Tuesday and went to the jury late Friday afternoon.

The verdict is just the latest trouble for the Belvedere, which recently has been home to a problematic bottle club in its basement and to meetings of the Black Guerilla Family gang.

According to Espo, Blank, who works for the Baltimore County Public Schools, had dinner with two sisters and other friends at the Belvedere's downstairs restaurant, The Owl Bar, before riding the mirror-walled elevator to the top of the century-old Beaux-Arts building for some salsa dancing.

Standing near the center of the room, looking at the dance floor, Blank felt something brush against

her leg and lifted up her leg, Espo said. When she put it down, she toppled 19 steps to the landing between the 13th and 12th floors of the building, which has been converted to condominiums.

The manager of the 13th Floor and a regular patron testified at trial that a scone on the stairwell wall was generally on, alerting visitors to the presence of the stairwell. But the plaintiff's witnesses said the lamp was off the evening of Nov. 24, 2007.

The rope, "according to the testimony from folks we put on, it sat very close to the floor," Espo said. "And it's not supposed to be there anyway. It's a hazard in the event there's a fire."

Blank, who sued in February 2009, was first treated at **Mercy Medical Center** downtown before eventually reporting to **Union Memorial Hospital** in North Baltimore for surgery on her right wrist. Stitches on her forehead and the insertion of screws and a plate in her wrist, which were removed five months later, Espo said, have left Blank scarred and sore, with limited use of that hand.

And that January 2008 wedding Blank was looking forward to?

"She got married but she was in pain," Espo said. "It was not what she had in mind."