

HOTCHKISS PUPIL STUDYING IN CHINA

Jury awards \$42 million in student tick-bite case

By Michael P. Mayko

BRIDGEPORT — A summer study program in China for a former student of The Hotchkiss School, an exclusive prep school in Litchfield County, changed a young woman's life forever, but for the worst.

Never again will Cara Munn, now 20, speak another word or be able to process information as quickly as she did before contracting encephalitis after a June 24, 2007, tick bite on a school hiking trip near Mount Panshan.

"She is a very highly intelligent woman," said her attorney, Antonio Ponvert of Bridgeport's Koskoff, Koskoff & Bieder law firm. "She's not able to speak an intelligible word. She will never be able to speak again."

At 1:30 p.m. Wednesday — after about eight hours of deliberations — the jury of six women and two men awarded Munn and her parents \$41.7 million in damages against the exclu-

sive 122-year old Hotchkiss School in Lakeville, where annual tuition ranges from \$39,750 to \$46,775, according to the Hotchkiss website.

The award included \$31 million for emotional and psychological suffering, \$7.2 million for future medical care and rehabilitative treatment, \$2.5 million for lost earnings and \$450,000 for past medical expenses.

Ponvert said he, Munn and her parents "were very, very appreciative" of the jury's attention during the eight-day trial before U.S. District Judge Stefan R. Underhill. Ponvert added that his client communicates by typing about 10 words a minute.

"She has managed to do her best under very extraordinary circumstances," said Ponvert, who tried the case with help from Linda Grossberg, a legal assistant.

In his lawsuit, Ponvert charged Hotchkiss with negligence by failing to warn students and parents they could be subjected to

insect-transmitted diseases in China, failing to ensure students took insect bite precautions before and during the trip, failing to include medical personnel on the trip, and failing to make advance arrangements to return any injured or ill students to the United States.

Lawyers for the school argued in court papers that such illnesses are so rare that they could not have foreseen a risk or be expected to issue advance warnings.

Munn, just 15 at the time, arrived with classmates in China on June 11, 2007. Ponvert said she was bitten on the hiking trip and began experiencing "a shattering headache ... high fever" and later, mental confusion and seizures.

The girl's parents arranged for the medical evacuation of their daughter.

Once back home, Munn spent two weeks at New York Presbyterian Hospital and another six weeks at the Rusk Institute of Rehabilitation Medicine in New York.

