

FORMER HOTCHKISS SCHOOL STUDENT

Jury awards \$42M in 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 Pan-shan, outside Beijing.

"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 hours of deliberations — the jury of six women and two men awarded Munn and her parents \$41.7 million in damages against the exclusive 122-year old Hotchkiss School in Lakeville, where annual tuition ranges from \$39,750 to \$46,775, according to the school's 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 said his client communicates by typing nearly 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, 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 arrangements to return any 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 been expected to issue warnings.

Munn, 15 at the time of the trip, arrived with class-

mates 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.

Munn, of New York City, was taken to a rural medical clinic that initially diagnosed her problems as cardiac-related, according to Ponvert. She was then transferred to the Beijing United Medical Center, where she spent several weeks.

The girl's parents, Orson and Christine Munn, had to travel to China and arrange for the medical evacuation of their daughter to the United States. Once back home, Munn spent six weeks in New York for treatment.

"Historically, our students have undertaken study, service projects, and travel in the United States and throughout the world and have derived great benefit from these opportunities," school spokeswoman Roberta Jenckes said. "We continue to hope for improvements to her health. While we will not comment on specific elements of the case, we plan to appeal this verdict."

