

Jury Awards Disabled Former Student \$41.75 Million

By **CHRISTINE DEMPSEY**
cdempsey@courant.com

BRIDGEPORT — A former student who has lasting injuries from contracting tick-borne encephalitis while on a school trip to China won a \$41.75 million jury award from The Hotchkiss School on Wednesday.

After about eight hours of deliberation in U.S. District Court, a jury of two men and six women announced its finding that the school was negligent after an eight-day trial spread out over three weeks, said the former student's lawyer, Antonio Ponvert III of Koskoff, Koskoff & Bieder.

"I think the take-away message is that schools need to be a lot more careful when they're taking other people's minor children overseas," Ponvert said.

The private boarding school, which is in the Lakeville section of Salisbury, plans to appeal the verdict, spokeswoman Roberta Jenckes said.

In a written statement, Jenckes said, "We remain very saddened by this student's illness. We continue to hope for improvements to her health."

Cara Munn, now 20, was 15 and a freshman at Hotchkiss at the time of the trip in the summer of 2007. She became gravely ill after hiking in a rural area of China known for its tick and mosquito infestation, Ponvert said.

Other students also became sick on the trip, but Munn's illness was the most severe.

According to the lawsuit, the trip leaders, who had no medical training, "did not appreciate the significance of the initial symptoms of the illness — which included total body paralysis, de-

pressed levels of consciousness and seizures."

Cara's parents, Orson D. Munn III and Christine Munn, flew to China and brought her to New York for medical treatment, clearing the last 10 rows of a commercial flight, Ponvert said.

The viral encephalitis, which is swelling of the brain, caused "severe neurologic injuries and disabilities that interfere with her ability to engage in her normal life's activities," the lawsuit states. It will "likely continue to impair her for the remainder of her lifetime."

While Munn understands what is going on and is able to attend college, she cannot speak as a result of the illness, Ponvert said. She drools, has trouble closing her mouth and cannot make facial expressions that match her emotions, he said.

She has some motor skill problems, too, Ponvert said. Although she communicates by texting, she can't type fast and she can't make a fist, he said. She also has trouble making plans.

Her medical expenses are in the "hundreds of thousands of dollars," the suit states.

Cara Munn testified during the trial. When Ponvert asked her how she sees herself in her future, she typed for about 30 seconds. Her answer: "I see myself as an old spinster," he said.

When he asked if she's optimistic about having children someday, she answered with a question.

"How would I teach a child to talk?" she asked.

Ponvert said there were communication breakdowns.

The school's trip leader, for whom Chinese is a primary language, failed to properly commu-

nicate that a hike on Mount Panshan, more than 60 miles from a city, was planned, he said. Parents thought their children would only visit urban areas, he said.

The school also didn't prepare parents for the disease risks in China, sending them a link to information about Central America instead, Ponvert said.

While students used insect repellent at times, it was left on the bus during the hike, Ponvert said.

"It was a tragic series of errors," he said.

The lawsuit, filed by Cara Munn and her parents, also alleges the school lacked protocol for handling medical emergencies.

According to the lawsuit, Hotchkiss "holds itself out as one of this nation's premier college preparatory boarding schools" and as "offering high-quality international study and travel programs to its students, with a particular emphasis on the quality of its international programs involving China and its long-standing China connection."

With that, Hotchkiss agrees, according to Jenckes' statement: "We put great care and thought into planning and administering off-campus programs, and we extend the same care to students on these trips as to students on campus. 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."

"We care deeply about all our students. We make every effort to protect them, whether they are here or participating in a School-sponsored activity off-campus," she said.

