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Association of Trial Lawyers of America



The True Story of the McDonald's Coffee Case

How twelve everyday Americans decided Stella Liebeck's case was not a joke.

By the End of the Trial, the Jury Was Outraged



79-year-old Stella Liebeck of Albuquerque, New Mexico was in the passenger seat of her grandson's stopped car when she was severely burned by spilled McDonald's coffee. Stella suffered 3rd-degree burns over 6% of her body, including her inner thighs, genitals, and buttocks. She was hospitalized for eight days, undergoing skin grafts.

Stella, a Republican who had never filed a lawsuit in her life, didn't want to go to court. She offered to settle with McDonald's for the cost of her medical expenses, but the company refused - even after a mediator suggested they should settle. Once in court, it was revealed that McDonald's deliberately kept its coffee 20 degrees hotter than industry standards and was aware from 700 prior incidents

that this practice could result in severe burns. The company decided not to reduce its temperature and not to warn its customers of any risk.

In the end, McDonald's behavior outraged jury members who were skeptical of the case. Even the judge - who reduced the jury verdict by more than 80% - called McDonald's conduct reckless, callous, and willful.

On the Hill

Stella Liebeck's case is a prime example of why cases are tried in a courtroom and not newspaper headlines. Yet, cases like Stella's are repeatedly misused by Members of Congress as excuses to interfere with the courts. In fact, almost 20 bills are pending that would restrict ordinary Americans' access to the courthouse and the right to trial by jury. Members of Congress should not use one-sided half truths to limit people's rights.

[How Stella Liebeck's Third Degree Burns Became a "Pop Tort"](#)

By the Numbers

3rd degree: Severity of burns that covered 6% of Stella Liebeck's body, requiring skin grafts and reconstructive surgery on her inner thighs, genitals, and buttocks. - [Ohio State Law Journal](#)

\$500,000: Amount McDonald's spent to settle prior scalding coffee claims. - [Wall Street Journal](#)

\$800: McDonald's offer of compensation to Ms. Liebeck. - [Ohio State Law Journal](#)

In the News

Visit the [ATLA Press Room](#) for information about other important issues.

[Legal Myths: Hardly the Whole Truth](#)

USA Today, January 31, 2005

"Horror stories offered by industry groups play to a weakness in the media for 'you-are-not-going-to-believe-this' stories. Of course, it is not surprising that the stories are unbelievable—because many never occurred."

[Bestowing the First Chucklehead Award](#)

Ventura County Star, December 18, 2004

"Don't blame poor Stella for loony litigation, whether it's factual or fiction... It seems that Stella Awards come in two flavors—true and bogus—and both flavors can be considered unfair to Stella Liebeck."

Related fact sheet: [Journalists Expose the Real Meaning of "Frivolous"](#)

Quote of the Week

"The facts were so overwhelmingly against the company."

- [Juror Betty Farnham](#)

News & Research

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