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## **Boca pilot's family awarded \$25 million in fatal mid-air collision near Deerfield**

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A Broward jury awarded \$25.2 million Wednesday to the family of a pilot killed in a collision of two planes near Deerfield Beach almost three years ago.

The family of Steve Ross, a Boca Raton chaplain, filed the wrongful-death suit against Robinson Aviation, a private contractor operating the Boca Raton and Pompano Beach control towers.

Ross was one of five people who died when two small planes crashed in the water off Deerfield Beach on the evening of June 16, 2003.

Ross is survived by his wife, Julie, and four children: Ashley, 21; Jordan, 19; Benjamin, 14, and McKenzie, 9.

The jury in Circuit Judge Victor Tobin's courtroom awarded \$1.2 million for economic damages and, for pain and suffering, \$10 million to Julie Ross and \$3.5 million to each of the four children.

Steve Ross and a longtime friend, Douglas Bauer, 48, were flying a Cessna 182 north to Boca Raton Airport. They were returning from a missionary trip in the Bahamas and had just cleared U.S. Customs at Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport.

A Cessna 172, with a family of three aboard, was headed south to Fort Lauderdale Executive Airport. At the controls was private pilot Johnny Mark Willey, 39, of Margate, who was learning to be an airline pilot at Gulfstream Training Academy.

Willey was taking his wife, Susan, 43, and his daughter, Shelbi, 12, for a ride along the coast.

The two planes plowed into each other about 1,000 feet above the Deerfield Beach International Fishing Pier and plunged into the water as stunned beachgoers looked on.

According to the lawsuit, the two planes collided moments after both pilots had made contact with air traffic controllers in Pompano Beach and Boca Raton.

"Robinson Aviation ... otherwise directed or failed to direct air traffic so as to avoid the mid-air collision of the two aircraft," the lawsuit reads.

Attorneys representing Robinson Aviation could not be reached for comment Wednesday.

Robinson contended it was "obligated to provide traffic advisory and traffic alerts only if they were actually aware of a potential danger," said Steven C. Marks, the attorney representing the Ross family.

"If you carry their position to the illogical extreme, they could be doing anything, if they're sleeping they're not aware. And their position is that if they're not aware they don't have to do anything. ... It was an absurd argument. Fortunately, the jury didn't buy it.

"Our position was there's nothing more important, the highest priority of anybody in the tower has to be providing advisories and alerts to prevent midair collisions."

The Ross family settled with Gulfstream Training Academy for an undisclosed amount more than a year ago, contending that Willey was "not fit, qualified or properly trained."

Ross was a chaplain at Boca Raton Christian School. He was a "stellar individual" and left behind "a stellar family," Marks said.

"As [Julie] was listening to the case and learning how easily this could have been prevented had the controllers done their job, all the time her reaction was, 'and my children could have had their father,'" Marks said. "That speaks volumes about her character. She doesn't think in terms of herself, she thinks in terms of the children losing their dad, not that I lost my husband and I'm raising these four kids by myself."