

Jury awards woman \$3M in 1979 sex assault case

She accused a former Margate lifeguard of grooming her when she was underage. She realized the impropriety, and its trauma, beginning in her 30s, she said.

By Amy S. Rosenberg
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ATLANTIC CITY — Rachel Neufeld Del Rossi had just turned 15 in 1979 when she says she was sexually

assaulted by two Margate lifeguards during a summer she was working as a mother's helper on the Argyle Avenue beach.

The contact with one of them, Steven Chasens, then 24 and now an acupuncturist in Coral Gables, Fla., continued for years, she alleged in a lawsuit filed in Atlantic County.

Del Rossi, now 61, alleged that she was groomed by Chasens, coerced to cross state lines to Florida, and given drugs and plane tickets, all of which Chasens denied. Del Rossi said she suffered extreme emotional and physical distress.

Last week, the civil lawsuit she

filed in 2021 came to a jury trial in an Atlantic City courtroom about five miles from the beach in Margate where the two met, before Judge Ralph Paolone.

On Friday, the jury returned a verdict against Chasens, finding him liable for his actions toward an underage Del Rossi, and awarded her \$3 million in compensatory and punitive damages, according to her attorney, Jeff Fritz.

"They found liability on assault and battery, human trafficking, and intentional infliction of emotional distress," Fritz said.

Chasens' attorney, Robert Agre, declined to comment.

The City of Margate, initially named as a defendant in the lawsuit for allegedly failing to properly train and supervise its lifeguards, settled in February and agreed to pay Del Rossi \$485,000, according to Fritz. The city did not admit culpability, he said.

The other lifeguard, Brendan Bradley, whom Del Rossi accused of sexually assaulting her inside the Argyle Avenue lifeguard shack, was also named in the lawsuit. He denied the accusations in court documents and settled in February for an undisclosed amount, according to court documents.

Del Rossi never reported the assaults to police and testified that she only considered the impropriety of the contact, and its effect on her, beginning in her 30s.

Del Rossi was able to bring a civil case under the 2019 New Jersey Child Victims Act, which permitted a person who alleged injuries due to a childhood sexual assault to file a lawsuit within a two-year time period defined under the law.

The trial was the first time Del Rossi, now a part-time worker at Talbots in Cherry Hill, had seen Chasens, 70, since 1983. It was an emotional moment for the woman, who said her teenage contact with the lifeguard affected her for the rest of her life.

"The first time I saw him, of course, I lost it," she said during a break before the trial's opening statements Monday. "But, you know, it's interesting because in my mind, he was that young man. And now this man."

She has been resolute in this near-lifelong quest.

"I feel this is an opportunity for me to finally get justice, like this is a long time coming," she said.

Chasens denied any inappropriate contact and said in court documents he does not even remember if he was a lifeguard after the summer of 1979. Agre, his attorney, said Chasens acknowledged having sex with Del Rossi when she was 17. Bradley, the other lifeguard, denied assaulting her and testified that he doesn't remember Del Rossi.

"No matter what, it's a win for her, because of the courage it has taken," said her friend Alyson Bunker.

The lawsuit also accuses Chasens of violating New Jersey's human-trafficking statute, which he denies.

Fritz, Del Rossi's attorney, told

the jury the case involved "an adult sexual predator who attempted to prey" on her, and the lawsuit was her attempt to hold him accountable after all this time.

Del Rossi testified that Chasens kissed her on the beach the day she met him and Bradley, and that she first had sexual intercourse with him in the home of the people she was working for and three to five other times that summer.

Fritz showed the jury letters Chasens sent to Del Rossi expressing his love. He attended her senior prom, when she was 17 and he was 27. It was not until she was in her 30s, Del Rossi said, that she began reassessing those years.

Agre told the jury in opening statements that Chasens acknowledged having a consensual sexual relationship with Del Rossi when she was 17. But he denied any inappropriate contact with her when she was 15 or 16.

Agre noted that Del Rossi's family was aware of the relationship, and argued that classic "grooming" involved concealment. Chasens visited Del Rossi at her mother's home, and even sent the family flowers, according to testimony.

Del Rossi said in the interview that the experience has affected her in "incredible ways: relationships, trust issues, PTSD, anxiety, just, you know, just the things that he did to me that just haunt me continuously."

"I've been through so much therapy — three treatment centers, just many 12-step meetings," she said. "Just to deal with the aftermath of his grooming and his abuse just has been a lifelong battle for me."

In court documents, Chasens denied assaulting Del Rossi and purchasing plane tickets and said he did not remember how he met her. He denied having any inappropriate contact with her while



Rachel Neufeld Del Rossi outside the Atlantic County Civil Courthouse in Atlantic City. Del Rossi, 61, accused former Margate lifeguard Steven Chasens of sexually abusing her beginning when she was 15. Amy S. Rosenberg / Staff



Atlantic County Civil Courthouse last week. Chasens was found liable for his actions with the underage Del Rossi.

employed as a Margate lifeguard. Fritz showed a photo of the two of them in the Cayman Islands, and another at the Diplomat Hotel in Hollywood, Fla., when Del Rossi was 17.

On the witness stand, Del Rossi sobbed as she spoke of the continual triggers and the impact on her life, of her ability to be intimate with her husband, of her continued therapy and medication for anxiety and depression, of "the insanity of the way that it affected me in so many ways."

She said she returned to the Argyle beach in 2011.

"I wanted to see," she said. "I drove there. I dropped and I sobbed. And I sobbed and I sobbed. What would my life have been like if he chose somebody else?"

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