

Fascist Alex Jones ordered to pay damages to parents of Sandy Hook shooting victim

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Alex Jones, the fascist radio show host, conspiracy theorist and *InfoWars* publisher, was ordered by a Texas jury to pay nearly \$50 million in compensatory and punitive damages to the parents of a Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting victim.

Neil Heslin and Scarlett Lewis, parents of 6-year-old Jesse Lewis, one of 20 children and six adult staff members killed on December 14, 2012 by 20-year-old Adam Lanza at Sandy Hook in Newtown, Connecticut, filed suit against Jones in 2018. The suit was filed in Austin because Jones' media empire, Free Speech Systems, is headquartered there.

On his Infowars program and in other media outlets, Jones promoted right-wing disinformation about the event, claiming it was a false flag operation by gun control advocates. Among the lying claims made publicly by Jones were that “no one died” in Sandy Hook, the incident was “staged,” “synthetic” or “manufactured,” and “a giant hoax,” “completely fake with actors.”

In an initial decision on Thursday, the jury awarded \$4.1 million in damages to the parents to compensate for pain and suffering caused by the conspiracy theories peddled by Jones, which led to repeated threats against them by deranged and fascist elements acting on his claims that the Newtown massacre was a hoax.

The next day, after hearing testimony from an expert witness on behalf of the plaintiffs, who disputed Jones' claims of poverty and estimated that his media empire was worth from \$135 million to \$270 million, the jury awarded \$45.2 million in punitive damages, bringing the total damages to \$49.3 million, one of the largest ever in a defamation case.

The decision was the first time that Jones has been held accountable for spreading lies about the horrifying events at Sandy Hook Elementary School. The jury

decision is also the first of other potential awards against the far-right media personality who was instrumental in organizing and financing the fascistic rally held by Donald Trump near the White House that culminated in the violent attack on Capitol Hill on January 6, 2021.

Jones faces at least two other suits by parents of the Newtown children, and others may file suits now that his vulnerability to the legal process has been demonstrated. In all three suits, Jones failed last fall to comply with court orders during the discovery process.

Heslin and Lewis won default judgments against him, as did the other two families. In October, Judge Maya Guerra Gamble ruled that Jones was legally responsible for inflicting emotional distress on Heslin and Lewis and that he was liable for defaming Heslin, because he had claimed the father was a “crisis actor” performing a role.

Jones' behavior throughout the trial and his comments after the award indicate that he has no intention of backing away from his belligerence and promotion of far-right politics. If anything, these will now intensify.

While Jones and his businesses generate tens of millions of dollars in revenue and he has been personally given \$9 million in cryptocurrency donations, the *InfoWars* publisher claimed that a decision of \$2 million or more would ruin him financially. But the plaintiffs' financial expert, Bernard Pettingell, testified that Jones had used shell companies and two large loans to make it look like he had no money.

During the trial, attorneys for the family argued in opening statements and closing arguments that, “Speech is free, but lies you have to pay for.” At one point in the proceedings, attorney Bankston exposed

the fact that Jones had perjured himself by claiming he did not have any text messages concerning the defamation lawsuits filed by family members against him.

Bankston asked, “Mr. Jones, did you know that 12 days ago, your attorneys messed up and sent me an entire digital copy of your entire cellphone with every text message you’ve sent for the past two years?” and, “You know what perjury is, right?”

Heslin and Lewis gave emotional testimony and told the jury that the lies spread by Jones and his media empire “tarnished the honor and legacy” of their son Jesse Lewis, who was one of the 20 first graders killed at Sandy Hook, and tormented them for years. Heslin testified that he could not even begin to describe “the last nine-and-a-half years of hell” that he has lived through because of Jones. He described in detail how he fears for the safety of himself and his family.

Lewis spoke directly to Jones during her testimony, saying, “Jesse was real. I’m a real mom.” She then exposed something of the nature of the present political reality where media figures such as Jones have support from sections of the ruling elite for polluting public consciousness with foul and extremely dangerous right-wing, white supremacist and xenophobic ideas. Lewis said, “It seems so incredible to me that we have to do this. That we have to implore you—not just implore you, punish you—to get you to stop lying... It is surreal what is going on in here.”

After the second jury award, Lewis told the media, “This is an important day for truth, for justice, and I couldn’t be happier... This has been a long battle, a long time spent—10 years—and to have the result a strong message to the world that literally, choosing love is what we need to do.”

The defendant’s attorneys claimed that under Texas law, punitive damages are capped at \$750,000 per plaintiff, which would limit the total punitive sum to \$1.5 million. They said he would appeal the damages award.

Judge Gamble said that the limit on punitive damages is not hard and fast. “So we do have laws in Texas where we claim to trust our juries and then we don’t trust our juries, and that’s true,” she said. “And I’m sure the judgment will properly reflect the laws of Texas in that regard, so don’t need to worry about that.”

For almost a decade Jones used his media platform to mobilize fascistic and backward social elements in society against the families of the 26 individuals who perished at Sandy Hook, many of whom have faced constant harassment and death threats from right-wing elements. Jones and others like him have functioned as recruiters for alt-right and fascist movements and groups in support for the ongoing conspiracy to overthrow the US Constitution and install Donald Trump as oligarchic dictator.



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