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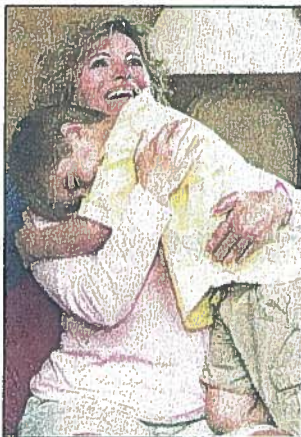
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In this 2011 photo, then 4-year-old Will Blanchard gives his mother, Faye Boroughs, a hug during a vacation at Destin West.



KATHY HARRISON  
The Log

## Jury awards family millions

By **LAUREN SAGE REINLIE**  
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**CRESTVIEW** — A jury on Tuesday found two local companies negligent in the 2009 natural gas explosion that killed a man, badly burned his fiancée

and left their son fatherless.

The verdict awards \$14.8 million to Faye Boroughs and her son William Blanchard, who was 2 when a gas leak caused a massive explosion in the laundry room of the family's home in Destin.

After a week-and-a-half-long

trial, the jury found Panhandle Plumbing and Andrews Cooling & Heating neglected their responsibilities in work they did on the home and that their negligence directly caused the explosion.

Boroughs, who still lives in the area, said the process has

been "exhausting."

"I'm glad it's finally over," she said Wednesday.

### Chaos of the moment

On Nov. 19, 2009, Boroughs tried to turn on a gas heating

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## EXPLOSION from Page A1

system in the family's home on Calhoun Avenue.

She and her fiancé, Michael Blanchard, smelled gas coming from the laundry room and went to check it out.

When they flicked the light switch on, the room exploded.

Almost all of Michael Blanchard's body was burned. The 50-year-old died three weeks later at the hospital.

About a third of Boroughs' body was severely burned and the scars remain. She spent more than a month in the hospital.

Their son wasn't burned, but he was present when the house burst into flames: He felt part of the house blown to pieces and heard the screams of his mother.

Somewhere in the midst of the chaos, the course of the toddler's life was inexorably changed.

Skip Finkbohner, an attorney for the family, said the jury's verdict was fair, "but we really shouldn't have had to be here in the first place.

"This never should have happened."

### 'Innocent victims'

According to Finkbohner, the problems that led to the explosion started in 2002. That was when Panhandle Plumbing added a gas line to the laundry room that was not properly labeled and lacked a safety shut-off valve. The company did this work without a permit, he said.

Shortly after, the homeowners bought a gas dryer from Andrews Cooling & Heating. The company failed



FILE PHOTO | Daily News

Two people suffered burns November 2009 when an explosion at this house at 117 Calhoun Ave. in Destin ignited a fire. The blast blew out the garage door. View a copy of the verdict at [nwfdailynews.com](http://nwfdailynews.com).

to install the dryer according to safety code provisions and the manufacturer's installation instructions, he said.

The homeowners moved out in 2006, taking their gas dryer with them. They rented the home to Boroughs and Blanchard who brought in their own electric dryer, Finkbohner said.

The gas line, which was not installed correctly, also was not capped.

When Boroughs tried to turn on the heater that fateful day in 2009, gas began flowing into the laundry room, quickly filling it.

The spark from the light switch easily ignited the gas.

The jury found no part of the explosion was in any way the couple's fault, which Finkbohner said was fairly unusual in a negligence case.

"They were innocent victims," he said.

### A likely appeal

Attorneys for Andrews

Cooling & Heating, which has been in business in Fort Walton Beach since 1979, and Panhandle Plumbing in Destin said they oppose the verdict.

"While we respect very much the jury's process, we disagree with the finding that Panhandle Plumbing had any involvement whatsoever with the gas line that was installed in 2002," said Mike Grimley, an attorney for the company. "We intend to pursue all legal remedies to vindicate our client."

Charles Beall, an attorney for Andrews Cooling & Heating, said they plan to appeal the verdict.

Finkbohner said the legal system did the best it could to help deal with the losses the family suffered in the explosion.

"The process worked but it has not under any stretch of the imagination fixed things," he said. "It can't put people back to the way they were before this senseless tragedy. It never can."