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Complex Owner Ruled Negligent in '98 Fire *Jury awards \$8.3 million to apartment resident burned in blaze*

By Andrea Ball

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An Ohio man was awarded \$8.3 million Friday after Travis County jury ruled that negligence caused the apartment fire that burned and scarred half his body.

Joseph Kropka, 40, was critically injured in January 1998 during a late night fire at Kensington Apartments, 3300 Manor Road. The fire, which damaged more than a dozen units, forced 100 residents to flee their homes. In a two-week trial that began earlier this month, Kropka's lawyers argued that the fire was caused by a faulty gas stove. KML, Inc., the Dallas company that owns Kensington Apartments, argued that Kropka, a cigarette smoker, was to blame. On Friday, the jury ordered KML to pay Kropka \$8.3 million. "I cried," Kropka said Friday night. "Now I can start making plans for the future." Lawyers for KML could not be reached for comment. Kropka had been in Texas just two weeks when the fire occurred. The construction worker had come in search for work, leaving his friends and family behind in Steubenville, Ohio. Lawyers say Kropka was asleep when his kitchen stove exploded. After being burned in an attempt to extinguish the fire, Kropka escaped from the apartment and carried a nearby child to safety. "All I remember is seeing a barefoot little girl and glass everywhere, and I just didn't want her to step on the glass," Kropka said. His lawyers argued that many tenants and maintenance workers at Kensington Apartments had complained about the gas stoves. The company knew about the danger and took no action, lawyer David Dunham said. "Even the former maintenance workers were scared of the stoves," he said. After the fire, Kropka moved back to Ohio, where his family could help him during his recovery. He has had five skin grafts. Although pleased with the jury verdict, Kropka said his former life – one where he constantly worked, played and relaxed in the sunshine – is gone forever. "What little sun I do get makes my skin feel on fire again," he said. "This changed my whole life."