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Locals get measure of satisfaction

Pamela Lopez-Johnson, News-Press Staff Writer

The OJ Simpson verdict Tuesday did not spark strong emotions on the streets of downtown Santa Barbara.

Rather, people expressed relief that the second trial was over. Some simply shrugged when Simpson was found liable in the slayings of Nicole Brown Simpson and Ronald L. Goldman.

"I'm sick of the whole thing," said Susan Merrick, whose family owns Joe's Café on State Street. "Most of the customers here weren't interested in watching the verdict being read, they wanted to watch the Laker game."

In a unanimous decision, a civil jury awarded Goldman's family \$8.5 million in compensatory damages. The same jurors are now to consider punitive damages.

Residents and visitors were asked for their opinions in restaurants, bars, clothing stores, a beauty salon and as they walked on State Street.

Many said they hoped the verdict would finally give the matter closure – not only for the Goldman and Brown families, but also put an end to the national frenzy surrounding the case.

"It's disgusting, the morbid fascination people have about these murders," 25-year-old Daryl Cope said as he served drinks behind the bar at Left At Albuquerque. "Maybe now people will give it a break. Maybe they'll let it go."

Others hoped the media would move on to more substantive issues.

"I really don't care about O.J. Simpson," said Connie Brown, who was drinking a beer inside Joe's. "It's not that important to me. I just want to get my real news back."

Dara Folkert, manager of New Deal clothing store, explained her indifference.

"During the first (criminal) trial, it was the people versus O.J. Simpson," she said while dressing a mannequin in a display window. "It was all about solving the crime, it was about seeking the truth."

"It's more difficult to get involved during the civil trial because it's about money. I mean, who cares about the price of the dress Nicole was wearing when she was killed?"

But New Deal owner L. Kelsey said the ruling would at least give the Goldman and Brown families some comfort.

"My honest-to-goodness feeling is good," Kelsey said. "If they couldn't get him the other way, they got him this way."

He said he was disgusted Simpson wasn't found guilty during the criminal trial.

"It's so unfair when money can buy you murder," Kelsey said. "Good riddance, and I hope they don't overturn it."

Grace Cash, 27, a hair stylist at Supercuts, concurred.

"This is a relief, everyone can relax now," Cash said. "Everyone knows he did it and should have been found guilty the first time."

Cash said monetary punishment – even a fine of many million dollars – isn't harsh enough.

"His lawyers are no dummies," she said. "I'm sure they helped him stash money in Swiss bank accounts. That money is well-hidden."

"It's not like he'll have to go on welfare," echoed Regina Alvarado, 27, who was sitting at a booth at Joe's, having dinner with a friend. "He has money somewhere."

Her friend, Yolanda Jones, 25, didn't expect the damages verdict – or her response to it.

"I was surprised that my eyes got watery," Jones said. "Justice was finally served."

"I was surprised because I thought for sure he would get off again," Alvarado added. "I lost faith in the system after the first trial."

Some people said it was wrong to allow a person to be tried in civil court after being found not guilty in criminal court.

"A jury of his peers found him innocent," said Daryl Bolden, 30. "Now he's been found guilty of wrongful death? They should let the man rest, let him go on with his life. And the media ought to let it go, too."

A few people questioned jury selection. Nine of 12 jurors in the criminal trial were black, while nine of 12 in the civil trial were white.

Kathy Kellermann, a UCSB associate professor who teaches a course in persuasion and another called argumentation and advocacy in the Simpson trials, said the verdicts had nothing to do with the racial makeup of the juries.

"You need to be very cautious when making those conclusions," she said Wednesday. "There was a big difference in the gender makeup, the evidence presented, the witnesses they heard, the judge, the attorneys, it was a wildly different trial."

"It would be like taking a course and flunking it the first time, then taking it a second time with a different teacher and aceing it."

In Left At Albuquerque, Keith Helm, 27, surmised that Simpson will spend the rest of his life trying to be a good father and citizen. But Helm didn't hide his animosity.

"It'll catch up with him when he dies and goes to hell," Helm said.

"And we'll be there, too, so we'll kick his (expletive)," added Helm's friend, Bryan Dinkins, 32.