

THE STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA

In the Court of Appeals

APPEAL FROM RICHLAND COUNTY

Court of Common Pleas

Honorable L. Casey Manning, Circuit Court Judge

Case No. 2016-002268

Bertha Rodriguez

Respondent

v.

Taliah Shabazz

Appellant

RESPONSE BRIEF OF APPELLANT

Taliah K. Shabazz
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Pro Se Appellant

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AUG 16 2017

SC Court of Appeals

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Table of Authorities3

Statement of Issues on Appeal 4

Statement of the Case 4

Statement of the Facts..... 5

Arguments

1. THE APPELLANT DISAGREES WITH RESPONDENT THAT CLOSING REMARKS WERE PROPER AND THAT A FAILED OBJECTION SHOULD NOT DISMISS THE COMPLAINT.....8

2. THE APPELLANT DISAGREES WITH THE RESPONDENT ABOUT OBJECTING TO THE TRIAL JUDGE’S ANSWER TO THE JURY’S QUESTION ABOUT HEALTH INSURANCE. THE APPELLANT’S ARGUMENT IS NOT WITH THE TRIAL JUDGE BUT WITH THE DEFENSE COUNSEL WHO PREJUDICED THE JURY AND THE JURY WHO ASKED A SPECIFIC QUESTION PERTAINING TO THE DEFENSE COUNSEL’S CLOSING REMARKS.....11

3. THE APPELLANT DISAGREES WITH THE RESPONDENT THAT DEFENSE CLOSING ARGUMENTS WERE WELL WITHIN THE PROPER SCOPE OF VIGOROUS REPRESENTATION OF HER CLIENT14

4. APPELLANT DISAGREES WITH RESPONDENT THAT APPELLANT HAS WAIVED ANY CHALLENGE TO THE TRIAL JUDGE’S DECISION TO DENY HER MOTION FOR A NEW TRIAL OR *NISI* *ADDITUR*.....15-16

Conclusion17

TABLE OF AUTHORITIES

CASES

Boan v Blackwell 541 S.E.2d 242 (2001).....	12
Cassim v Allstate Insurance Co. 33 Cal.4 th 780,796 [16 Cal.Rptr.3d 374, 94 P.3d 513] (2004).....	15
Murphy v. International Robotic Systems, Inc., 766 So. 2d 1010, 1031 (2000).....	11
O’neal v Bowels, 314 S.C. 525, 431 S.E.2d 555 (1993).....	13
Sanford v. Rubin, 237 So. 2d 134, 137 (1970).....	11

STATUTES

Attorney’s Oath Mandated by Rule 402 (k), SCACR.....	15
South Carolina Rules for Civil Procedure Rule 201(a).....	16
South Carolina Rule for Civil Procedure Rule 201(b).....	16
South Carolina Rules for Civil Procedures Rule 50(d).....	16
South Carolina’s Rule on Evidence 103.....	16

OTHER AUTHORITIES

American Medical Association Guide to the Evaluation of Permanent Impairment, 6 th Edition, published 2008, Chapter 3, Table 5-5, page 401	9
Barry Sullivan, Barry Levenstam & David von Ebers, <i>Perserving Error in Civil Cases: Some Fundamental Principles</i> , 32 TRIAL LAW. GUIDE p.1, 2,3 (1988).....	16

Due Process of the Fourteenth Amendment.....14

Kuckes, Nicki (2006) “Civil Due Process, Criminal Due Process, “Yale Law & Policy Review: Vol. 25: Iss.1 Article 2.....17

Procedural Due Process.....17

Conclusion.....17

STATEMENT OF ISSUES ON APPEAL

1. Did opposing counsel err in citing plaintiff’s impairment rating, and does respondent have grounds to dismiss complaint?
2. Did jury respond to Judges Instructions appropriately, or did they disregard judge’s instructions, in favor of opposing counsels demand to cut plaintiffs medical bills, and did opposing counsel prejudice the jury against the plaintiff Miss Shabazz, when the jury came back with a question about insurance pertaining to counsels closing remarks?
3. Did opposing counsel final arguments contain prejudice, and was it harmful to plaintiff, or was opposing counsel just dutifully representing the defendant within the proper scope of rigorous representation?
4. Does respondent have the right to deny appellant due process in this case?

STATEMENT OF THE CASE

On May 8, 2012, Plaintiff, Taliah Shabazz was injured in an automobile accident and incurred permanent bodily impairment injuries as a result of this accident. Miss Shabazz had reportedly reached maximum (MMI) by her physician.

The Appellant, Taliah Shabazz, filed a lawsuit against Bertha Rodriguez, on February 17,

2015 for damages and injuries sustained.

This case is one of admitted liability. The case was initially brought before the Honorable Jocelyn Newman on June 13, 2016, but was declared a mistrial due to an undecided verdict on June 14, 2016. The case was tried again before the Honorable Casey Manning on August 29, 2016 and August 30, 2016; judgment was entered on August 31, 2016.

On August 29 and August 30, 2016, the case was tried by a jury which consequently awarded her 12, 500.00 in actual damages; said jury award was less than the medical expenses incurred as a result of the accident. On November 8, 2016 Miss Shabazz filed a notice of appeal *pro se*.

FACTS

On May 8, 2012 Miss Shabazz was injured in a motor vehicle crash that totaled the small Suzuki Swift she was driving. The crash was caused by a negligent driver's failure to give way to oncoming traffic. The driver pulled from a private driveway across both lanes in an attempt to make a left-hand turn in front of Miss Shabazz, which caused Miss Shabazz to T-bone the vehicle. On impact with the van Miss Shabazz's airbag deployed striking her in the face, while the overlap of the seatbelt cut across her left shoulder and clavicle (collar bone) leaving abrasions / skin tears and the lap belt left marks at the right hip area where the seat belt was buckled. The shoulder strap exerted such force of pressure on the left side that swelling of the upper back, burning on the neck, and left shoulder pain were immediate. Other injuries manifested over a period of time.

Miss Shabazz was rushed to Palmetto Richland Memorial Hospital via ambulance, where she was treated in the trauma area of the ER. The abrasions across the neck and chest area caused

burning sensations with increased stiffness and non-radiating pain in the left shoulder as well as sharp pain in the anterior medial clavicle area and a burning sensation of the overlying skin. The ER doctor indicated that she had severe muscle spasms with acute injuries, no broken bones, but possible rotator cuff injury. She was given Anaproxen and Flexril and instructed not to drive, work, or go to school while taking Flexril due to its sedative effects.

Miss Shabazz was given Ibuprofen 600 mg and Flexeril 10mg orally and discharged in the care of her mother. She was instructed to follow up with her primary care physician for further treatment as well as to apply ice to her left shoulder for swelling and heat to her neck.

On the morning of the crash Miss Shabazz had been on her way to Midlands Tech to take a final exam. This unexpected detour to the E. R caused her to have to drop out of school for a period of time while she struggled to regain some semblance of her previous health. She did a follow up with her doctor on May 16, 2012 where he continued her on Flexril 10 mg 3x daily as needed for treatment of shoulder sprain and neck strain secondary to MVA on 5/8/12. On May 31, 2012 her physician referred her to Carolina Shoulder and Knee for further treatment.

On June 19, 2012 Miss Shabazz was seen by Kevin Nahagian, a Carolina Shoulder and Knee specialist, for left shoulder pain, stiffness, decreased range of motion and decreased strength. Dr. Nahagian diagnosed Miss Shabazz as having a left slap tear/ shoulder and neck injury causing a tremendous amount of spasms over her supra serratus and supra spinous fossa, with hematoma (knot) in that area further adding to her discomfort. Plan of treatment included 750 mg twice a day of an anti-inflammatory medication (Nabumetone) for thirty days along with 10 mg of Flexeril every six hours as well as to continue previous meds given and physical therapy three times a week starting immediately (6/20/2012). As Miss Shabazz could not drive

herself to and from her appointments she relied on family members to provide her transportation, often causing difficulty with their schedules.

The frustration with being out of school, being an inconvenience to others, being sedated or in constant pain—particularly after physical therapy with topical modalities, cervical traction, topical deep tissue massage and peri-scapular strengthening—caused severe anxiety. In addition Miss Shabazz faced the fear of becoming addicted to prescription drugs.

From June 20, 2012 until January 9, 2013 she was poked, prodded, pulled, stretched, massaged, iced, heated, placed in cervical traction, and endured a series of x-rays, MRI, and CT scans. She convinced Dr. Nahagian that she needed to go back to school and would continue her physical treatments at home as long as she returned from her semester with re-evaluation.

In January 2013 she went back to school and anti-inflammatory medication to control muscle spasms and continued her physical exercises. The medications that controlled the aches and pains were no longer being used. Infrequent headaches began to manifest and become more frequent by the end of the semester (May 2013). She saw Dr. Nahagian again for re-evaluation of continued pain under the left shoulder blade and muscles spasms. She also complained of frontal facial headaches. Dr. Nahagian placed her back on Relafen 750mg twice a day with physical therapy and scheduled reevaluation for August 4, 2013.

His plan included having a neurologist to evaluate for stiffness and left shoulder pain as a direct result of MVA on May 8, 2012. Where in onset was immediately after the injury, knots in the chest and back along with frequent headaches was a manifestation of ongoing physical pain and suffering.

Once again school had to be placed on hold while her recovery took center stage. On May

24, 2013, Miss Shabazz saw Dr. Ogburu the neurologist for evaluation of chronic left shoulder, back and headache pain caused by the accident. After physical assessment, a plan of care was developed for Miss Shabazz that included a full body bone scan, MRI of brain, EMG/NCV upper extremities, MRI of cervical spine and, aquatic therapy. Medications included soma, and ibuprofen anti-inflammatory meds, Fioricet (used for migraine headaches) and Zoloft (anxiety and depression). Miss Shabazz was also counseled on opioid dependency, addiction and side-effects of all her medications. Many more months of pain, suffering, and anxiety continued to plague Miss Shabazz's health before Dr. Ogburu's assessment showed that Miss Shabazz had reached her MMI (maximum improvement). She was given a rating of class 1, grade B, according to the AMA 6th Edition (a medical text that sets the disability ratings). Prior to this accident Miss Shabazz was in excellent health.

Miss Shabazz still has grave concerns of paying more than \$16,000 in medical expenses, not including previous attorney fees. She is working part time to pay for college, and medical expenses to creditors that have been demanding being paid as they submit medical bills to collection agencies and credit bureaus, damaging her ability to obtain loans, or grants based on credit ratings.

ARGUMENT:

1. THE APPELLANT DISAGREES WITH RESPONDENT THAT CLOSING REMARKS WERE PROPER AND THAT A FAILED OBJECTION SHOULD NOT DISMISS THE COMPLAINT.

In Respondents reply brief, the defense argues that *"It is perfectly acceptable to cite or even quote a witness' testimony during a closing argument for the purpose of challenging it. This is precisely what the respondent's attorney did, and even a cursory review of the closing argument makes this abundantly clear."* The defense then goes on to argue that, *"opposing counsel was only stating the impairment rating chart in its entirety, 0% through 100%, during*

closing arguments.”

The appellant disagrees. The defense reply contradicts the closing arguments in question. In closing arguments to the jury, opposing counsel took it upon herself to explain to the jury what the impairment rating given by the appellant’s neurologist meant. Once she took it upon herself to explain, she was no longer citing or quoting a witness testimony. The counsel stated

Defense closing arguments

“Dr. Ogburu, the plaintiff’s neurologist gave her a one percent impairment rating for her entire body. One percent on a scale of one to 100. For her upper extremity, he gave her an impairment rating of two percent, two percent on the scale of one to 100.” [closing arguments, T.p152 line 24, T.p 153 line 1-3]

The 0% to 100% scale was never mentioned in the doctor’s testimony like the respondent claimed. Dr. Ogburu was very specific in describing Miss Shabazz’s injuries: Class One, Grade B. 2 percent upper extremity impairment (UEI) converted to 1percent whole body (*Dr. Ogburu’s Testimony T.p 123 lines 2-25, T.p 124 Lines1-4*). He also referenced where the plaintiff’s impairment rating can be found—the American Medical Association also known as AMA, 6th Edition:“The (AMA)chart depicts Appellant’s shoulder injuries as a Class 1, Grade B- 2 soft tissue “Shoulder contusion or crush injury with healed minor soft tissue or skin injury.” (American Guide to the Evaluation of Permanent Impairment, 6th Edition, published 2008, Chapter 3, Table 5-5, pg 401.)

The chart also depicts that soft tissue is only measured in **two** classes: Class 0 and Class1. Class 2, 3 and 4 columns are left blank and therefore are irrelevant to Miss Shabazz. Also, the defense never mentioned that the AMA chart in its entirety is 0% to 100%, nor did counsel argue the range of percentages as they appear on the impairment rating chart, which was argued in the

respondent's brief—but that Miss Shabazz's injuries were measured between the 0% to 100% scale.

In Miss Shabazz's case, according to AMA, class 1 upper extremity impairment (UEI) only ranges from 1%-13%, with MMI measuring between 0%-3%, placing Miss Shabazz 2% MMI in the 0%-3% category, not 2% on a scale of 1%-100%. The Defense purposely misrepresented in minimizing Miss Shabazz's injuries by arguing that those ratings were not sufficiently serious to warrant a significant damages award.

The respondent argues that because the appellant failed to object to any of the closing remarks presented by the respondent that it is grounds to dismiss the appellant's complaint. Respondent then goes on to argue that the appellant's first issue is not preserved for appellate review, citing case *State v Black*, 319 S.C. 515,521,462, S.E.2d 311, 315 (Ct. App.1995). As a reason to disregard first issue on appeal. As the court explains:

It is a fundamental principle that a contemporaneous objection is required at trial to properly preserve an error for appellate review...The proper course to be pursued when counsel makes an improper argument is for opposing counsel to immediately object and to have a record made of the statements or language complained of and to ask the court for a distinct ruling thereon.

The appellant disagrees. The Defense counsel's statement of Miss Shabazz's injuries is an enormous error that needs to be addressed. Jurors should not make decisions based on false evidence, and attorneys should not knowingly present false evidence in an effort to persuade jurors.

Furthermore, the Defense's closing argument does not need an objection based on the Fundamental error of law Doctrine: "*In a civil case, the fundamental error occurs when the evidence presented at trial, is so erroneous that it damages the heart of the case, and the fairness of the trial. Fundamental error,*" which can be considered on appeal without objection in the

lower court, is error which goes to the foundation of the case or goes to the merits of the cause of action.” Sanford v. Rubin, 237 So. 2d 134, 137 (1970). The Defense’s closing statements were improper and so erroneous that it caused the jury to become prejudiced and invoke harm on Miss Shabazz. “Before a complaining party may receive a new trial based on an unobjected-to closing argument, the party must establish that the argument being challenged was improper, harmful, incurable, and so damaged the fairness of the trial that the public’s interest in our system of justice requires a new trial.” Murphy v. International Robotic Systems, Inc., 766 So. 2d 1010, 1031 (2000).

2. THE APPELLANT DISAGREES WITH THE RESPONDENT ABOUT OBJECTING TO THE TRIAL JUDGE’S ANSWER TO THE JURY’S QUESTION ABOUT HEALTH INSURANCE. THE APPELLANT’S ARGUMENT IS NOT WITH THE TRIAL JUDGE, BUT WITH THE DEFENSE COUNSEL WHO PREJUDICED THE JURY AND THE JURY WHO ASKED A SPECIFIC QUESTION PERTAINING TO THE DEFENSE COUNSEL’S CLOSING REMARKS.

The judge instructed the jurors that Miss Shabazz was entitled to loss of enjoyment of life and actual damages including pain and suffering as well as loss of expenses because of Defense negligence.

The court stated:

“If you find that the plaintiff is entitled to a verdict for actual damages and she is, your verdict should include an amount to cover any past, present, and future damages which were proximately caused by the defendant. Any future damages must be reasonably certain to occur in the future as a result of the defendant’s negligence or act.” (Judges Instructions Tp.160 Lines 9-15)

An award for pain and suffering compensates the injured person for the physical discomfort and the emotional response to the sensation of pain caused by the injury itself. Separate damages are given by mental anguish where the evidence shows, for example, that the

injured person suffered shock, fright, emotional upset/ and or humiliation as the result of the defendants' negligence. *Boan v Blackwell* 541 S.E.2d 242 (2001).

The Defense admitted liability and *not* "limited liability," she produced no witnesses or evidence that showed that any part of Miss Shabazz's diagnoses/injuries resulted from any cause other than the accident on May 8, 2012. No parts of the diagnoses or doctor's testimony claimed the injuries sustained were from any cause other than the accident on May 8, 2012. Defense Counsel produced no evidence of accidents or injuries related prior to the accident or Miss Shabazz's permanent injury disability ruling. In fact the Defense admitted this to the jury.

"I would be standing before you admitting that exact same thing that plaintiffs' counsel and Judge Manning have already mention, that we admit that we are at fault for this accident." (defense counsel opening remarks T.p. 50. Lines 7-10).

The Defense's only argument was that Miss Shabazz had complained about headaches a few months after her accident and claimed this was not enough to warrant full damages for awards. She asked the jury to cut off her medical bills at a certain part that was deemed relevant to Miss Shabazz's injuries by stating:

Defense Closing Remarks.

"You have every provider that she went to and you have the amount of money that each of those bills were. I want you to stop at January 9, 2013, that's a year after the accident when she began complaining about those chronic migraine headaches." That is all of the treatment after that period. This I want you to pay for." (closing arguments T.p.154 line 14-line 20).

Miss Shabazz was referred to the neurologist Dr. Ogburu by her primary care physician Dr. Dean Floyd of Eau Clair Cooperative Health, based on Dr. Nahagian's plan of care on 05/ 6/ 2013[Please See Dr. Nahagians Notes on Ms. Shabazz headaches [May 6, 2013]]. . Due to left shoulder pain, back pain and headaches. (*Plaintiffs Exhibit 5*, Dated 5/ 24/2013). The left shoulder pain and back pain were the primary problems she was being consistently treated for

by all her doctors/ specialists. The headaches were a symptom that manifested due to Miss Shabazz injuries. While headaches are known to stem from injuries with neck, back and shoulder pain, the defense asked jurors to cut actual damages. Miss Shabazz was still seeing Dr. Nahagian during that time, as well as Dr. Ogburu, for her primary injuries. The headaches Miss Shabazz suffered would go under pain and suffering, and loss of enjoyment in life. Defense closing arguments were improper and the results were damaging towards Miss Shabazz especially when defense told the jury this:

“ You have an important job to do today here in the state of South Carolina, You’re to award Miss. Shabazz money if you believe that the injuries she sustained were caused by this accident. And if you do believe that, the money that you are to award her is to put her in the same position that she was in prior to this accident. We understand that she had to experience some inconveniences, but this is not an opportunity for Miss. Shabazz to get rich.”(defense closing arguments T.p. 154, lines 1-8)

The amount the Defense claimed the jury should award was so specific, in addition to wanting to cut Miss Shabazz’s medical bills, made the jury think that Miss Shabazz had already been compensated for her injuries, which is why the jurors came back with this specific question pertaining to the defense closing remarks:“Has the cost of the first year’s appointments before the neurology appointments began already been covered by Ms. Rodriguez’s Insurance?” (jury’s question T.p 166 Line 2-4)

Less than 10 minutes after the judge’s instructions to disregard the insurance question the jury came back with a verdict of \$12,500. The jury improperly considered factors other than Dr. Ogburu’s testimony, the witness testimony, and evidence that was presented in trial. The only remedy for a verdict infected by improper considerations outside the scope of the evidence presented by the parties is a new trial. O’neal v Bowels, 314 S.C. 525, 431.

3. THE APPELLANT DISAGREES WITH THE RESPONDENT THAT DEFENSE CLOSING ARGUMENTS WERE WELL WITHIN THE PROPER SCOPE OF VIGOROUS REPRESENTATION OF HER CLIENT BY THE RESPONDENT'S ATTORNEY.

Appellant would like to reiterate that while counsel is allowed to emphasize points in favor of her client's case, she may not assume facts not in evidence or invite the jury to speculate as to unsupported inferences, or inferred statements such as:

Defense closing arguments

" You have an important job to do today here in the state of South Carolina, You're to award Miss. Shabazz money if you believe that the injuries she sustained were caused by this accident. And if you do believe that, the money that you are to award her is to put her in the same position that she was in prior to this accident. We understand that she had to experience some inconveniences, but this is not an opportunity for Miss. Shabazz to get rich."(Closing arguments T.p. 154, lines 1-8)

Defense closing remarks were not within the proper scope of vigorous representation for these reasons: 1. Defense asked jurors to disregard judge's instructions to take all of Miss Shabazz's injuries into account even after the defense had admitted full liability. 2. Closing remarks minimalized Miss Shabazz's injuries and permanent disability rating and created speculations and inferred that Miss Shabazz was only trying to "get rich" off the Defense. 3. Asked jurors to become personal partisans instead of impartial jurors and infringe on Miss Shabazz's 14th amendment due process rights to have a fair and impartial trial. 4. Asked jurors to award a verdict in the amount of \$8, 851.14 and disregard the rest of Miss Shabazz's bills that totaled almost \$17,000. 5. Finally, succeeded in prejudicing the jury against Miss Shabazz. The most damage caused was when the defense demanded the jury cut Miss Shabazz's medical bills by almost half. The evil of such argument is that it risks converting the jurors from impartial decision makers into personal partisans. As one appellate court explains: "The appeal to a juror

to exercise his substantive judgement rather than an impartial judgement predicated on the evidence cannot be condoned. It tends to denigrate the juror's oath to well and truly try the issue and render a true verdict according to the evidence." *Cassim v Allstate INS Co.* 33 Cal.4th 780,796 [16 Cal.Rptr.3d 374, 94 P.3d 513] (2004).

As stated previously, jurors should not make decisions based on false evidence, and attorney should not knowingly present false evidence in an effort to persuade jurors. The defense counsel took an oath to vigorously represent her client within the proper scope, but the defense also took an oath to not mislead an opposing party, judge, or juror. As mandated by Attorney's Oath rule 402 (k) SCACR, where it stipulates that

"I will employ for the purpose of maintaining the causes confided to me only such means as are consistent with trust and honor and the principles of professionalism, and will never seek to mislead an opposing party, the judge, or jury by a false statement of fact or law;" Attorney's Oath mandated by rule 402(k), SCACR .

The appellant contends that an attorney can present *factual* evidence in favor of their client effectively, while presenting non -prejudicial evidence against opposing counsel to the court. These two ideas are not mutually exclusive. However, in Miss Shabazz's case, the defense arguments were improper and outside the attorney oath mandate and scope of vigorous representation of her client.

4. APPELLANT DISAGREES WITH RESPONDENT THAT APPELLANT HAS WAIVED ANY CHALLENGE TO THE TRIAL JUDGE'S DECISION TO DENY HER MOTION FOR A NEW TRIAL OR *NISI ADDITUR*.

The *pro se* appellant disagrees with the respondent that the appellant has waved an issue to the trial judge's decision. The appellant contends with the respondent that in most cases the

court of appeals will not review alleged trial errors. However, the preservation of error rule is subject to two exceptions. Many court of appeals recognize the plain error doctrine, or in a civil case fundamental error, and will consider erroneous errors that effected the fundamental fairness of trial proceedings even when the appellant does not object. Although these two exceptions are limited, one being: the trial court and the litigants knew what action the appellant wanted to take. Secondly Federal Rule 46 of civil procedures: the appellant had no opportunity to object when the ruling was made. [*Preserving Error in Civil Cases*] The trial judge delivered the motion in the absence of the appellant; at the time, appellant was represented by her attorney at trial. The appellant was present at trial to hear the jury verdict, but was absent from hearing the trial judge's ruling on the denial of motion for a new trial.

“ Denial of Motion. If the motion for judgment notwithstanding the verdict is denied, the party who prevailed on that motion may, on appeal, assert grounds entitling him to a new trial in the event the appellate court concludes that the trial court erred in denying the motion for judgment notwithstanding the verdict. If the appellate court reverses the judgment, nothing in this rule precludes it from determining that a party is entitled to a new trial, or from directing the trial court to determine whether a new trial shall be granted.” (South Carolina Civic Rule and Procedure 50 (d))

South Carolina Civil Rules Procedures 201(a) Appeal may be taken, as provided by law, from any final judgment, appealable order or decision. 201(b) only a party aggrieved by an order, judgment, sentence or decision may appeal. Also (a) *Effect of Erroneous Ruling. Error may not be predicated upon a ruling which admits or excludes evidence unless a substantial right of the party is affected. (South Carolina's Rule on Evidence 103)*

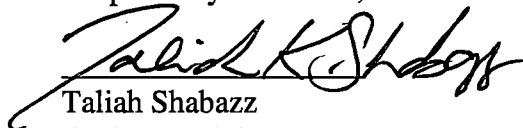
Miss Shabazz was entitled to an impartial jury. That is a procedural due process right “*a neutral decision- maker, required by due process principles, is not simply a person without financial interest in the case, but more broadly a person who is not affiliated with, or biased in favor of or against, one side or the other. A decision- maker cannot act as both a party and a neutral, because those two roles are fundamentally incompatible.*” (procedural due process) [Civil Due Process/ Criminal Due Process p.11,12] The defense admitted liability, and not limited liability all there was left was to decide were actual damages. The evidence the defense attorney demanded the jurors to ignore was evidence that affected the substantial right of the party, in this case Miss Shabazz.

CONCLUSION

For the reasons stated this Court should reverse the judgment of the circuit court.

August 16, 2017

Respectfully submitted,



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PROOF OF SERVICE OF A NOTICE OF APPEAL

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Taliah K. Shabazz

Appellant,

v.

Bertha Rodriguez,

Respondant

PROOF OF SERVICE

I certify that I have served the appellant reply brief and designation of matter, to Ms. Rodriguez's attorney of record, Allyce Bailey, Post Office Box 1473, Columbia South Carolina 29202, by depositing said materials in the United States Mail, postage prepaid, on August 16, 2017. I have also submitted these materials to Ms. Tammy Kitchens, the clerk of court.

August 16, 2017

s/ Taliah K.

Shabazz

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Cc: Tammy Kitchens, Clerk of Court,
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