

Former Miami Prosecutors Reunite to Score Multimillion-Dollar Verdict Against Strip Club Coco's

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Two veterans of the Miami-Dade State Attorney's Office scored a multimillion-dollar verdict against a notorious Miami after-hours venue.

Reginald "Reggie" Mathis and Bruce Jacobs spent much of November making the case before a Miami-Dade jury that their client, Christopher Nealy, was entitled to receive damages from his former employer Coco's due to permanent injuries he sustained outside the club during a shooting on Christmas night in 2011.

The plaintiff spent several years as a promoter for Coco's and helped to make "Wednesdays at Coco's" one of the most popular club nights in Miami. Nealy, who also rapped under the moniker S.O. Certified, was shot three times outside the club after a fight had broken out and spilled outdoors.

"He stayed in the hospital for 11 days; he had 7 surgeries; part of his small intestine was cut, and he has a bullet that remains lodged in him," Mathis said, listing the ways his client has been affected by his injuries. Although Nealy was given five years to live, it's been nearly

seven since the night of the shooting. Still, he's dealing with its effects. Mathis noted that Nealy has experienced PTSD-like symptoms since the shooting, adding that his client's "intestines gave out two weeks before the trial."

The person who shot Nealy, Michael Prophet, prompted the shootout when he began firing at another individual. Prophet was shot dead by security that same night. His killing was later deemed justified in court.

In the case against Coco's, the jury found in favor of Nealy and returned an \$8.7 million verdict, appointing 37 percent of the liability to the strip club. Mathis and Jacobs argued that Coco's had inadequate security on the night of their client's injury and are now seeking a final judgment of \$2,178,585.23 against the infamous establishment.

Read the final judgment:

"It was the Wild Wild West. They had it like an O.K. Corral, gun-slinging saloon," Mathis told the Daily Business Review. The complaint named Cosmic Corp., the company owned and operated by Coco's proprietor Ian Davis, as the defendant.

"This place is like a pirate's den," Jacobs added. "If you're going to run that kind of business, you need to take care of people and protect them."

Mathis noted that the damages awarded to Nealy represent the highest verdict he ever achieved. Both Mathis and Jacobs said it was the best possible outcome for a legal dream team that had reunited after nearly two decades apart.

"I started at the Miami-Dade State Attorney's Office in August 1996, and I believe Bruce came in March 1997," Mathis said. With his six-month head start on Jacobs, Mathis honed his rhetorical abilities before taking the incoming prosecutor under his wing.

As partners Mathis and Jacobs took particular pride in deconstructing the opposing counsel's arguments beyond recognition.

"We got called to the wood shed ... and we've just been friends ever since," Mathis said.

In the years since leaving the Miami-Dade State Attorney's Office, Jacobs has gone on to become an outspoken foreclosure attorney. Meanwhile, Mathis made the transition to practicing personal injury and criminal law matters. He's also made a foray into entertainment law and has represented the likes of rappers Rick Ross and Flo Rida.

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Despite their disparate career paths the trial partners have remained in touch and help one another out whenever possible.

"I had this case from 2011 and it finally came up for trial," Mathis explained. Because he was tied up in Los Angeles for the 2018 Latin American Music Awards on Oct. 25, Mathis was unable to attend the calendar call for Nealy's trial in person.

"I called Bruce 'cause I use his office sometimes for depositions," Mathis said. "He hits back and said you guys are going to trial ... on Oct. 31."

Given the quick turnaround time as well as everything at stake for his client, Mathis did not think twice about bringing in outside help.

"This is going to be a knife fight in a phone booth, who do I know that I can call? And it was Bruce! Without hesitation he was like 'I'm in,' " Mathis said.

"It was definitely like putting on an old glove," Jacobs said. "I picked the jury, Reggie did the opening, just like we used to."

Nealy's defense team argued that his injuries were foreseeable and thus preventable. According to Mathis, in light of the numerous instances of violence that took place on Coco's property, the club ought to have had stricter measures in place to protect patrons and employees from possible harm.

The attorneys noted that the club's surveillance system had a blind spot in the location where Nealy was shot, the same location where the general manager parked a vehicle.

"We made the argument they withheld their video," Jacobs said, noting the defense contradicted themselves continually, with witness testimonies often winding up at odds with their original discovery responses.

"They denied having any video! They denied knowing any witnesses! And all of this was helpful in showing [the jury] they were not being honest, were an unsafe business and our client got hurt in the business!"

It was only following an order from Circuit Judge Miguel De La O that Coco's provided unredacted surveillance footage to the court. They had previously submitted a video with 30 seconds missing.

"Our theory of the case was borne out by the videos," Jacobs said. He explained that the defense argued that it was Nealy who had started the fight in the club, and ran outside after security had separated the feuding parties.

"In the video you see a fight break out, [Nealy] jumps over a railing and tries to break up the fight," Jacobs added.

“The guy they tried to blame the shooting on was thrown to the ground. ... By the time it was over Reggie made it very clear that they should pay the man.”

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Martin Gilliam, who served as Coco’s defense attorney, said the jury was “swayed by sympathy rather than attention to the rule of law” and noted that Nealy was found to be 25.55 percent responsible for his own injuries.

“I tip my hats off to the plaintiff’s attorneys ... they did a great job of inflaming the jury’s passions, but that’s not the kind of law system we want to have,” Gilliam said. He expects the verdict to be overturned on appeal.

In the meantime, Mathis and Jacobs remained pleased with the outcome as well as the work that went into it. “Reggie and I have tried so many cases together, it was really kind of beautiful to be back in that synchronicity,” Jacobs said. “We got them to care about the client and to care about his injuries. ... You may not live his lifestyle but he deserved to be paid for his benefits, and the jury obviously agreed.”

Case: Christopher E. Nealy v. Comsic Corp.

Case no.: 2014-016863 CA 01

Description: Commercial premises liability

Filing date: June 27, 2014

Verdict date: November 16, 2018

Judge: Miguel De La O

Plaintiffs attorneys: [Reginald “Reggie” Mathis](#), Reginald A. Mathis LLC, Fort Lauderdale; [Bruce Jacobs](#), Jacobs Legal, Miami

Defense attorneys: Martin and Virginia Gilliam, Law Offices of Gilliam & Gilliam, Miami Gardens

Verdict amount: \$8,723,265