Jury: Nassau jail harassed gay officer

By Errol A. Cockfield Jr.

A federal jury in Uniondale late Tuesday awarded gay corrections officer James Manning $1.55 million in damages, finding that officers at the Nassau County jail discriminated against him.

The eight-member U.S. District Court jury, which deliberated for five hours, found homosexual prejudice in the Nassau County Sheriff's Department was a "custom and practice" that was "continuing, widespread, and persistent."

They also concluded that former Sheriff Joseph Galasso and Deputy Undersherrif Jerome Donahue, the jail's policymakers, had ignored Manning's complaints about slurs and derogatory fibers passed around the jail, but they assessed no damages against the two.

Lawyers for several organizations that fight anti-gay bias, including the Lambda Legal Defense Fund and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute, said the award was a record in New York for sexual discrimination by a government, and one of the largest in the country.

"I feel vindicated," Manning said. "Nobody at first seemed to care."

The verdict is the second in a little over a year in which a jury has found that a Nassau department discriminated against an employee based on sexual orientation.

Last year, James Quinn, a gay police officer, was awarded more than $500,000 in a bias case he brought against the police department.

Both awards come at a time when the county has been forced to cut costs because of ballooning deficits. After Quinn won his case in June, 1999, his lawyer, Leonard Leeda, froze the county's assets before finally collecting the award in April.

Nassau County Executive Thomas Gulotta declined comment yesterday on the latest award and its ramifications for the financially troubled county, referring questions to the county's attorney on the case.

Paul Millus, a Manhattan attorney who represented Nassau, said the emotion of the case, not its merits, influenced the jury's decision. "Ultimately the jury was motivated more by sympathy for Jim and his situation than it was by the facts of this case," he said.

The county's lawyers have denied any harassment. Millus said the verdict ignored an anti-discrimination policy that has been in effect at the Sheriff's Department since January, 1996.

He said Nassau plans to appeal the case but will first file post-trial motions requesting a new trial and a reduction in the damages.

Eco-Activists Vandalize LI Lab

By Kara Blond

Protest of genetic crops destroys 2 years' work

The activists at Uplands Farm left their mark in paint — ELF, the Earth Liberation Front — tying themselves to the British-based militant environmentalists who oppose the transfer of genes between different plants to create crops that are hardier, easier to process, better tasting or more nutritious. ELF, an informal coalition without a central leadership, claimed responsibility for the fires at the Vail ski resort in 1996 to protest deforestation.

"It really isn't just property destruction; many people view this as ecosystem protection," said Danny Henke, spokesman for Genetix Alert Press Office, which publicizes anti-genetic engineering activism.

"They believe it's the corporations and research entities, they're the ones who are the vandals."