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national news

**Teenager convicted
in slayings**

Setting a precedent, a Mississippi judge allows victims' HIV status admitted in trial

by Richard Shumate

A teenager who admitted shooting two gay men to death last October has been convicted of murder charges by a Mississippi jury.

Marvin McClendon, 16, claimed he shot Robert Walters and Joseph Shoemake in self-defense after they made sexual advances toward him. During the trial, Jones County Circuit Court Judge Billy Landrum allowed the defense to bolster that claim by admitting the results of HIV tests performed on the victims. But it took the jury just five hours to reject the self-defense argument and find McClendon guilty of two counts of murder on Feb. 9.

Landrum sentenced McClendon to two consecutive life terms. Prosecutors did not seek the death penalty.

On Oct. 7, 1994, Walters, 34, and Shoemake, 24, left a house party in Laurel together and never returned. Their bodies were found the next day along an abandoned railroad track. Both men had been shot in the head.

McClendon was arrested five days after the murders and confessed to the crimes. Local police officials insisted his motive was robbery and refused to investigate the murders as possible orientation-related hate crimes.

The murders took place in the same county as Camp Sister Spirit, a lesbian run feminist retreat that has been repeatedly harassed by its neighbors. The women at Sister Spirit contend that local law enforcement authorities have been indifferent to their complaints. Given that history, activists descended on Laurel to demand an outside investiga-

tion.

The ensuing media firestorm angered not only the county's residents, but also the friends and families of the victims, who insisted they were satisfied with the police investigation.

Though a grand jury refused to indict McClendon on robbery charges, Jones County District Attorney Jeannene Pacific told the jury that McClendon went willingly with the men after meeting them in downtown Laurel and stole \$100 from the victims after the murders. McClendon then went to a friend's house to play cards, and admitted that he had killed "two white guys,"

Pacific said. (The victims were white; McClendon is an African American.)

But McClendon's attorney, J. Ronald Parrish, called Walters and Shoemake "sexual predators" who were on the prowl the night they were killed. He contended that after they picked up McClendon, they drove to a remote area and attempted to rape him.

Arguing that an attempted rape committed by an HIV-positive person would amount to pointing "a loaded gun" and justify a claim of self-defense, Parrish asked Judge Landrum in December to order HIV tests on the victims. The judge agreed, sparking objections from prosecutors and protests from HIV-advocacy groups.

Landrum allowed those results to be admitted in the trial.

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