

Good from bad

Court proceedings surrounding the murder of two Medford lesbians continue, as a new community center takes shape

by Inga Sorensen

An estimated \$27,000 has been raised so far to establish a gay and lesbian community center in the Medford area. The center will likely be named after Roxanne Ellis, 54, and Michelle Abdill, 42, a Medford lesbian couple who were murdered in early December.

"I think contributing to the memorial fund has been an important and constructive way for people to express their grief over Roxanne's and Michelle's deaths," says Gerald Garland, an active member of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays of the Rogue Valley. "It has been a terribly painful experience not only for this community, but for people across the country. In fact, we've gotten many donations from people who don't even live in Oregon."

Ellis' and Abdill's bound bodies were found Dec. 7 in the back of Ellis' truck in an apartment complex parking lot in Medford, a relatively conservative enclave of 55,000 near the California border.

The couple, who lived in that Southern Oregon city for five years and owned a local property management company, had been killed execution-style: two bullets each to the head. They were outspoken opponents of local and statewide anti-gay initiatives in Oregon. Their murders gained international attention.

Robert James Acremant, 27, was arrested Dec. 13 and was arraigned on two counts of aggravated murder—a capital crime punishable by the death penalty.

Though he confessed to the murders shortly after police took him into custody and said he wanted to die by lethal injection, Acremant pleaded not guilty to the murder charges during legal proceedings in late January.

"God only knows what he and his lawyer are doing," says Lt. Tom Lavine, who heads up the Medford Police Department's criminal investigations unit. "Here you have this guy saying 'Yes, I did it,' and now he's saying 'No, I didn't do it.' I guess while it's sometimes frustrating, it's not unexpected."

Acremant has reportedly said anti-gay bias played no role in the killings. He did, however, tell a reporter that the fact that Abdill and Ellis were

lesbians—information Acremant says he soon surmised and later confirmed when he asked Ellis point blank whether the two were lesbians—"made it easier [to kill them]." He also told a reporter he didn't "care for lesbians."

"Bisexual women don't bother me a bit," he said during a jailhouse interview. "I couldn't help but think that she's [Ellis] 54 years old and had been

their church, and respected businesswomen.

"I've done everything to make sure there were no blunders during our investigation," says Lavine, adding his entire division was initially assigned to the case. With "mounds of evidence" now collected, he says, just two detectives remain on the case.

"We have reams and reams of paper on this. We've reinterviewed [Acremant's] father and have done lots of background work. If there was any question regarding needing a warrant or anything like that, we took the cautious route," says Lavine, whose department has received high marks for its handling of the case. "This is just too important to us."

No trial date has been scheduled yet, and Acremant's public defender, Ralph Monson of Toledo, Ore., who says he has handled an estimated 25 capital crime cases, says it's not unusual for "every-

says Monson, adding that he has filed motions to repeal Oregon's death penalty in each of his capital punishment cases. "I'm not disturbed that people are saying what they are, because that's the way this process is."

Monson says he has, in fact, filed motions in the Acremant case to repeal the state's capital punishment law, which was approved by voter initiative in 1984. With that action, voters—by a decisive 3-1 ratio—reinstated Oregon's death penalty.

Monson is arguing, in part, that the state law is unconstitutional because it violates federal constitutional guarantees that all states exercise a republican form of government—where elected representatives pass laws—rather than a democratic form—where citizens, for example, can pass legislation via initiative and referendum.

Not surprisingly, Monson declined to reveal his trial strategy, but Lavine expects the attorney will claim his client was "temporarily insane" when he committed the murders.

"That's what I'm hearing the most. There's no basis for that, but it wouldn't surprise me if that's the route they took," says Lavine. "I'd like to see him try and convince a jury of 12 of that."

Jim Willeford, a gay real estate agent living in Southern Oregon, says Ellis' and Abdill's deaths have prompted people throughout the region to work proactively toward creating a safe and tolerant environment for all people.

The PFLAG fund, for instance, has pulled in \$20,000 to support the creation of a community center, and the Lambda Community Center Association has raised \$7,000 for the effort.

A recent unity rally in Rogue River, meanwhile, attracted 200 people of varying backgrounds who came together to denounce hate crimes.

"People are still extremely emotionally connected to Roxanne and Michelle," says Willeford, who knew both women. "There was a lesbian who went to the Rogue River rally who said she did so because she felt that's what Michelle and Roxanne would have done. [Ellis and Abdill] were so loved and admired, and they continue to be role models for our community."

Willeford says two upcoming public meetings are designed to give people an opportunity to share their ideas about the community center. A meeting will be held April 2 at the Ashland Unitarian Church; the second gathering will be held at the United Methodist Church in Medford. Both meetings begin at 7 pm, and the public is encouraged to attend. Those who would like to contribute to the PFLAG memorial fund should send a check to PFLAG, PO Box 13, Ashland, OR 97520.



Michelle Abdill (left) and Roxanne Ellis

dating a woman for 12 years; isn't that sick? That's someone's grandma [Ellis has a daughter and granddaughter] for God's sake. Could you imagine my grandma a lesbian with another woman? I couldn't believe that. It crossed my mind a couple of times—lesbo grandma, what a thing, huh?"

Upon his arrest, Acremant maintained he selected the women as targets to rob their property management business. In a later interview, however, Acremant said he hadn't yet really revealed the motive, because he wanted to sell his story to the highest bidder, preferably a television program.

Ellis and Abdill were widely viewed as the ideal couple: down-to-earth, family-oriented, active in

one to move more cautiously in death penalty cases."

"From the courts to law enforcement to prosecutors to defense attorneys, everybody moves more slowly in death penalty cases because the stakes are so high and mistakes cannot be afforded," says Monson, who has been practicing law since 1968 and has "exclusively handled murder cases" since 1989.

With respect to Acremant, some have suggested that Monson has more than his client's interests at stake. He has been described as an outspoken opponent of the death penalty who is seeking to pursue a personal agenda: to abolish Oregon's death penalty.

"I only have my client's well-being in mind,"



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