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national news

Lesbians murdered

Activists urge Janet Reno not to dismiss bias as motive in the murder of a lesbian couple on the Appalachian Trail

by Inga Sorensen

Lesbian and gay activists say federal investigators must not prematurely dismiss anti-lesbian bias as a possible motive in the slayings of Julianne Williams, 24, and Lollie Winans, 26, who were found murdered June 1 along the Appalachian Trail in Virginia's Shenandoah National Park.

Media reports say the two were lesbians who were romantically involved, and maintain that robbery was not a factor in the murders.

The women's throats had been slashed. As of press time, there were no named suspects in the killings.

The Washington, D.C.-based National Gay and Lesbian Task Force contacted U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno by letter on June 7 over concerns that investigators were not seriously considering anti-lesbian bias as a possible motive.

NGLTF says those concerns stemmed from conversations with Federal Bureau of Investigation personnel working on the case who indicated that anti-lesbian bias was not being seriously considered.

"We do not know if Julie and Lollie were killed because they were lesbians. We do know, unfortunately, such a possibility is all too real," said NGLTF Executive Director Melinda Paras in her missive to Reno.

"We also know it is important that all hate crimes be identified accurately and honestly by the media and the criminal justice system," she continued. "Silence

are not separately prosecutable as hate crimes under existing federal law. However, because the deaths occurred on federal property, the United States would have jurisdiction to prosecute this matter federally. In addition, sentences in federal prosecutions may be enhanced if the crime was motivated by the sexual orientation of the victim, pursuant to authority passed under the 1994 Crime Control Act."

Shirley Lesser of Virginians for Justice, a statewide group that advances equal rights and justice, says she appreciates Reno's assurances.

"Virginians for Justice is pleased the Department of Justice listened and responded in a timely fashion to our concerns," she says. "Though individual investigators assured us that all possible motives are being pursued, we are relieved to have this officially confirmed by [Reno]."

The Appalachian Trail was the site of the 1988 murder of Rebecca Wight, who had been hiking on the Pennsylvania portion of the trail with her partner, Claudia Brenner.

The two were shot by Stephen Roy Carr, then 28, who said he was disgusted by the couple's acts of affection. Carr killed Wight and seriously injured Brenner, and is serving a sentence of life in prison without parole.

According to published reports, at least four other couples have been found murdered on federal park land in



Attorney General Janet Reno

Virginia since 1986.

One of those four was a female couple who were found with their throats slit in October 1986 on property known as the Colonial Parkway near Williamsburg.

According to *The Washington Blade*, a gay and lesbian newspaper, the area was known as a "lovers lane" site and was also situated near a spot known to be popular with gay couples. Three other couples, all heterosexual, were found murdered in similar circumstances in 1987,

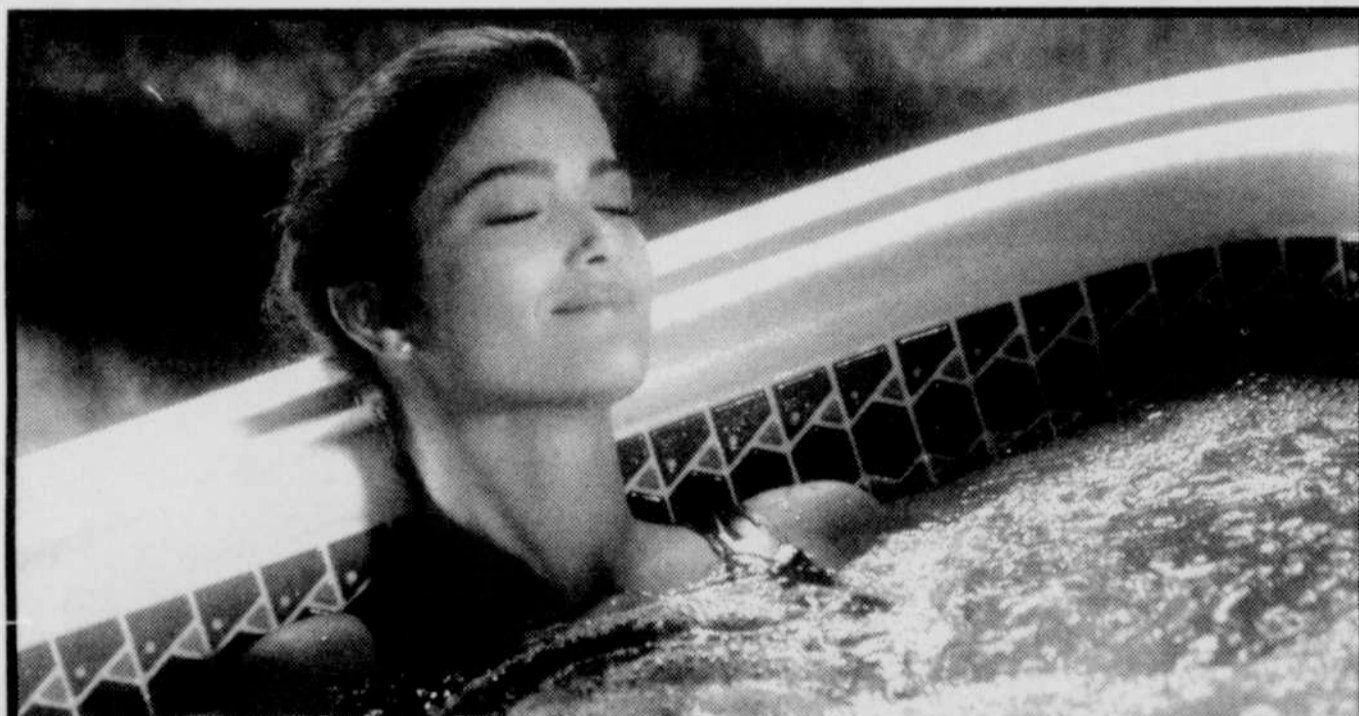
"It is important that all hate crimes be identified accurately and honestly by the media and the criminal justice system," says Melinda Paras. "Silence about such crimes feeds the apathy and ignorance that often surrounds them. Silence around hate violence and the possibility of such violence also ignores the other victims of these crimes—whole communities who live in fear and danger as a result of individual anti-gay attacks."

In response, Reno claimed investigators were "exhaustively considering all evidence."

In a letter to NGLTF, Reno wrote, in part: "As you know, crimes motivated by sexual orienta-

1988 and 1989.

The FBI investigated the murders but never identified suspects.



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