

local news

Acremant trial begins

Two years after his crime, the killer of two Southern Oregon lesbians faces a jury that will decide if he lives or dies

by Inga Sorensen

Jim Willeford says the old wounds are opening up a bit.

Willeford, a gay man who lives in Southern Oregon, was a friend of Roxanne Ellis and Michelle Abdill, whose bound bodies were found Dec. 7, 1995, in the back of Ellis' truck in an apartment complex parking lot in Medford, a city of 55,000 near the California border.

The couple, who lived in Medford for five years and owned a local property management company, had been killed execution-style: two bullets each to the head.

Nearly two years after the murders, the man who confessed to the killings is finally going on trial. Robert James Acremant, now 29, pleaded guilty last year to two counts of aggravated murder.

On Sept. 23, attorneys began choosing a jury that must decide if Acremant should receive the death penalty or get life in prison.

The proceedings are taking place in Jackson County Circuit Court. Lawyers have allotted two weeks to seat a jury; testimony is expected to take three to four weeks.

"I have made a conscious decision not to go to the trial," says Willeford. "It was an extremely difficult choice, because on one hand I felt like I should be there to honor Roxanne and Michelle. At the same time, I felt if I went, all that rage would come to the surface again."

The crime sent shockwaves throughout Oregon and the nation, perhaps because Ellis, 54, and Abdill, 42, were viewed as down-to-earth, family-oriented and active in their church.

"A fun day for them," said one media report, "might have been passing out Gatorade to runners in a charity race or seeing that a church fundraiser went off without a hitch."

They spent plentiful time with Ellis' daughter Lorri and her 3-year-old daughter Hannah, who lived nearby. Abdill joined her family in running the Annette Abdill Real Estate School and later opened ESP Property Management with Ellis.

Prior to Acremant's arrest six days after the bodies were discovered, fear was thick and widespread.

After all, there was no clear motive why anyone would want to kill either Ellis or Abdill. Both were respected friends, neighbors and businesspeople.

And Medford—actually all of Jackson County with the exception of artsy Ashland—was known as a conservative area. Though Oregonians over-



Michelle Abdill (left) and Roxanne Ellis

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all rejected a 1994 statewide anti-gay initiative, the measure won a majority in Jackson County, where the vote was 34,467 to 30,065. Abdill and Ellis were very outspoken against the anti-gay measures.

"Am I afraid? Yes, a little," Ashland resident Cherie Garland, a member of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays and a close friend of the women, told *Just Out* immediately after the murders were discovered. "Will I stop doing what I'm doing? Absolutely not."

Acremant, then 27, fled to his native California. He was subsequently arrested in Stockton after his mother recognized her son from a police sketch and turned him in.

Acremant freely admitted killing the women,

as well as murdering Scott George of Visalia, Calif., the son of a friend of his mother's, during a night of heavy drinking.

During an interview in a prison visitation room, Acremant—who has been described as a frustrated failure both in business and personal relationships—maintained he did not know that Abdill and Ellis were activists in the lesbian and gay community, and did not realize they were lesbians when he initially targeted them. (Acremant said the killings stemmed from a botched robbery attempt.)

He commented that sexual orientation had nothing to do with the murders, but added the fact that they were lesbians—information Acremant says he soon surmised and later confirmed when

he reportedly asked Ellis point blank whether she and Abdill were lesbians—"made it easier [to kill them]."

He also reportedly said that he didn't "care for lesbians."

"Bisexual women don't bother me a bit," he continued. "I couldn't help but think that she's [Ellis] 54 years old and had been dating a woman for 12 years; isn't that sick? That's someone's grandma for God's sake.... I couldn't believe that. It crossed my mind a couple of times—lesbo grandma, what a thing, huh?"

According to The Associated Press, Lorri Ellis has since moved back to Colorado Springs, Colo., where she grew up. (That's where her mother and Abdill lived prior to relocating to Medford.)

The news service says Ellis hopes Acremant gets the death penalty. As for PFLAG's Garland, AP says, "While believing Acremant deserves to be put to death, Garland doesn't feel she could vote for death if she were on the jury. She prefers knowing that the slayings served as a catalyst for creation of the Abdill-Ellis Lambda Community Center, a Victorian house in Ashland that serves as a sanctuary for [lesbians and gay men.]"

Willeford, who opposes the death penalty, says many positive things have grown from this tragedy.

"The entire community has really responded," he says.

Medford Mayor Jerry Lausmann—who many activists considered to be highly conservative—offered reward money and declared his city a hate-free zone following the murders.

Community screenings of *Not in Our Town* have been held throughout the Medford-Ashland area. The documentary, which has aired on public television stations nationwide, tells the story of how residents in Billings, Mont., responded to white supremacists when hate incidents were escalating in their community three years ago.

The video has been touted as an effective organizing tool to encourage average citizens to get involved in the effort to combat hate crimes and harassment spawned from prejudice.

Willeford says he'd like to see the project incorporated into schools in Southern Oregon.

And then there's the establishment of the community center.

"For me, this positive work is the best way to remember and honor Roxanne and Michelle," he says.

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