

local news

It's death

After four hours' deliberation, a Jackson County jury hands down a capital sentence in the Acremant trial

by Inga Sorensen

When an Oregon jury sentenced Robert James Acremant, 29, to death for killing Michelle Abdill and Roxanne Ellis, Cherie Garland felt no elation.

"They could cut him into a million pieces...but the fact is, it won't bring the girls back," says Garland, who along with her husband, Gerald, was a close friend of the Medford lesbian couple.

Not only that, but because Acremant received the death penalty, as opposed to life in prison, the decision automatically goes to the Oregon Supreme Court for an appeal.

"I've heard the process could take anywhere from three to 10 years," says Garland, who lives in Ashland and is a member of Parents, Family and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. "In so many ways, this is far from over."

On Oct. 27, after just four hours of deliberation, jurors sentenced Acremant to death by lethal injection for his double murder of Abdill and Ellis.

The couple's 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 duo had lived in Medford for five years and owned a local property management company. Abdill, 42, and Ellis, 53, had been killed execution-style: two bullets each to the head.

Acremant, who had fled to his native California, was arrested six days after the killings were discovered. He was picked up 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. (Acremant confessed to that slaying, too, but has not entered a plea and a trial date is pending.)

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 also told police he had been despondent after his girlfriend, a Las Vegas stripper, ended a relationship with him and he lost his job with a Los Angeles trucking company.

Acremant commented that sexual orientation had nothing to do with the murders, but added the fact that the women 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."

Acremant pleaded guilty to two counts of aggravated murder, and initially asked law enforcement officials to help him get the death penalty.

After several months of sitting in a prison cell, however, Acremant's attorneys say their client changed his mind and was aiming for life in prison.

Nearly two years after the murders, Acremant went before a jury. The proceedings, held in Jackson County Circuit Court, began Sept. 23.

During the trial, the prosecution described Acremant as having a "death kit," a black duffel bag whose contents included guns, handcuffs and disguises. According to Deputy District Attorney John Bondurant, Acremant planned to utilize the kit for more killings and robberies.

Defense attorney Mark Rader, meanwhile, urged jurors to sentence Acremant not to death, but to life behind bars.

"Don't cut his punishment short," he said. "Let this smart man sit behind prison walls and suffer every day the pain he created."

The 12-person jury unanimously opted for the prosecution's request: death.

That, too, was the choice of Ellis' daughter, Lorri Ellis. Lorri and her young daughter were living in Medford when the murders were committed.

During the trial, she said, "I lost my house, I lost my career, I lost all of my goals, my dreams, and it pretty much financially ruined me for who knows how long."

When the sentence came down, Ellis told The Associated Press, "[I] know that he doesn't have any remorse for what he did. Now it may put a little

fear in him for what my mom felt the day he killed her."

Ellis has since moved with her daughter back to Colorado Springs, Colo., where she grew up.

Gerald and Cherie Garland pondered what Abdill and Ellis would have thought about the sentence.

"We were just discussing that," Cherie said, when contacted the day after the jury's decision. "Roxanne and Michelle were such loving and forgiving people and devout Christians," says Cherie. "They had so much compassion."

Gerald adds, "They would have had compassion for Acremant's family."

While the murders have left much pain in their wake, the Garlands say they want to focus on the positive, namely the creation of the Abdill-Ellis Lambda Community Center, a Victorian house in Ashland that serves as a meeting space for sexual minorities and their friends.

"The moment you walk in, you sense the love," says Cherie.

"Every day there's something going on over there," adds Gerald.

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