

VIGIL HONORS MURDERED COUPLE

A diverse group is united by sadness for the loss of two lives and frustration with the media's handling of the story by Inga Sorensen

A misty rain is falling, though not enough to quell the candlelight. About 35 women and men encircle a bouquet of purple and yellow flowers which has been placed upon a metal milk crate; a rainbow flag is perched behind the makeshift shrine; each person is grasping a purple candle.

The evening rush-hour traffic is roaring by, making it a strain to hear those who speak.

It's wet and cold and noisy, but somehow that all seems irrelevant.

These people have other things on their minds. They have come to mourn and remember.

"This is such a terrible thing, we wanted to come out and show our support," says Clancy Morris, who along with her 16-year-old son, Forrest Coffman, has come from Vancouver, Wash., to be here, in front of the Ambassador Restaurant & Lounge at 4744 NE Sandy Blvd. in Portland.

It is March 10, two weeks after Jacqueline "Octavia" Anderson, 29, and Barbara Gilpin, 44, were murdered at this very site.

The couple, who were longtime partners, were allegedly shotgunned to death Feb. 24 by Eric Walter Running, 47, who has been indicted on two counts of aggravated murder and a felon weapon possession charge. Running is jailed and awaiting trial.

Mark McDonnell, a Multnomah County senior deputy district attorney, tells *Just Out* it will likely be nine months to a year before the case goes to trial. He also says prosecutors are "leaning towards seeking the death penalty."

At this time, few details have been made public as to what the trio's relationship was, as well as what actually transpired that night.

What is known is that two women are dead. Two women who shared years together.

Coffman says, "It's so sad that someone would do this. Why do people have to take others' lives?"

Critics say the slaughter didn't end there.

They charge that much of the mainstream media coverage immediately following the killings sent a message that these women were freakish and in some way responsible for their brutal demise.

The Associated Press and local television and radio stations publicly dubbed Anderson the "bearded lady" because she had some facial hair.

Though the *Oregonian* didn't use that phrase, staffer Dionne D. Peebles wrote in a Feb. 26 article that a police detective said Gilpin and Anderson were "known for being loving as well as argumentative."

Some say the piece left the distinct impression Anderson and Running were involved in an intimate relationship, and thus the murders stemmed from a jealous suitor's rage.

In addition, the article included a quote from a neighbor who describes Gilpin as "possessive." According to Peebles, the neighbor "said that the relationship between the women at times was stormy and that Gilpin sometimes confronted men who showed attention to Anderson."

Critics say framing the story in that way can lead a reader to blame the victim.

In an as-yet-unpublished letter to the *Oregonian*, Suzanne Pharr of the Lesbian Community Project writes, in part: "The subtext of your report suggested that something about

[Gilpin's] role in their relationship caused the murder. Instead, you could have named her as a hero for trying to stop this killer and taking the first round of bullets herself."

Jack, who hosts *It's a Queer, Queer World* on KBOO-FM and has worked closely with the

Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, an organization that monitors the media's handling of queer issues, says, "These women were brutally murdered, and some how the media makes it seem like they had it coming."

Despite her own media savvy, Jack admits that she, upon hearing the initial news reports, formulated an inaccurate picture in her mind.

"I thought, 'Here we have the older bearded butch and the younger bisexual flirting with a guy,'" she says. "I knew all the clues to look for and I still made these stereotypical errors."

The media's power to represent—or misrepresent—is as awesome as it is frightening, she says. "It's really scary when you think about it."

The "bearded lady" reference, meanwhile, rippled across the AP wire and onto the airwaves.

Beth Hyams, assistant news director for Oregon Public Broadcasting, was at home listening to KOPB-FM when the local newscaster

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described Anderson as the "bearded lady."

"I thought it was totally inappropriate," she says.

And it wasn't just the "bearded" component. "I don't think women should be called ladies," she says.

According to Hyams, the anchor told her he had gleaned the wording from AP copy. She responded by calling the AP to complain, and then sent an e-mail memo to OPB news staffers instructing them not to use that language again and explaining her justifications.

Some concerned citizens did the same, calling and writing the various television and radio stations which used the descriptive.

Erika Silver, executive director of Bradley-Angle House, says she was driving her son to

school when she heard an announcer on the radio station KBBT-FM use the phrase.

"She laughed so hard she couldn't even finish reading the story," says Silver. "I was so upset."

Silver and others contacted a handful of

women and characterized them as somehow freakish and their relationship as problematic, we suffered the loss of their humanity."

The piece describes Gilpin and Anderson as "longtime lovers, partners, sweethearts," as well as butch and femme, respectively.

Portland resident Pamela Hiebert is a friend of Anderson's mother, Carol. Hiebert is also an out lesbian and the mother of an adult daughter, Amber, who lives in Washington, D.C.

Over the years, says Pamela, "Carol doted over her daughter and I doted over mine."

Pamela is attending the vigil with her daugh-



Community members gather to share feelings sparked by the incident

media outlets to register their objections.

"If some man had been killed, they wouldn't have described him as 'the ugly pimply-faced man,'" she says.

The way the story was covered, she and others say, not only dehumanizes Gilpin and Anderson, it obliterates the seriousness of the situation—one that involves violence against women, violence against lesbians, and violence against those who refuse to conform to society's rigid gender roles.

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noted by lesbian activist and memorial attendee Bonnie Tinker.

"The same media who rushed to give sensationalized coverage are not here tonight," she told the crowd.

In other words, it's a freak show or nothing.

Those at the vigil, however, are here in part to rebuke that notion.

A handout distributed among the crowd states, "This vigil is to express sorrow for the tragic loss of Barbara and Octavia to our community. Violence against women hurts everyone. When Gilpin and Anderson were brutally shot, we all suffered the loss of their contributions to their friends, family and community. When the media treated them as nameless

ter, who is visiting for the week.

"This is so infuriating," says Amber, referring to the murders. She admits to fearing for her mother's safety.

"Hate crimes based on sexuality are far too common a problem," she says, adding, "I do worry."

For her part, Pamela, who was diagnosed with late-stage breast cancer five years ago, says her battle with the disease has given her "permission" to be "bolder as an out lesbian." That in part means standing boldly against violence against women, as she is doing tonight.

Sparky Lindsay knew Gilpin when the two attended elementary school together. Lindsay is also at the vigil.

She says Gilpin, who was a year ahead of her, possessed an air of independence even back then.

"I admired her," she says, adding, "Barb was very bright and loyal. She had a good soul."

Katharine Babad, a self-described out dyke, transgendered femme and woman with a beard, says she's sorry she'll never get a chance to meet Anderson.

"I would have really liked to have known her," she says, "and now that won't happen. That makes me furious."

And she's not the only one.

As the memorial comes to a close, a woman in the circle starts to chant, "A woman named Octavia and Barbara died. A woman named Octavia and Barbara died."

It is clearly a spontaneous gesture.

Others join, repeating the statement in unison a few more times.

Upon the final chant, the woman adds, "And we will not forget that."