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## NORTHWEST news

### THE DYING GAME

Continued from the cover

"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," Acremant told investigators. "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?"

On Oct. 27, 1997, a jury sentenced Acremant to death for the double murder. The decision was automatically referred to the Oregon Supreme Court for an appeal.

Last month, the court rejected Acremant's second effort to represent himself in the appeal.

The death penalty has snagged a lot of attention of late.

On Feb. 24, Betty Lou Beets, a grandmother, became the 121st person executed in Texas since Gov. George W. Bush—possibly this country's next president—took office in 1995.

On Jan. 31, meanwhile, Illinois Gov. George Ryan placed a moratorium on all executions until it can be determined whether all the state's Death Row inmates are in fact guilty.

And Italian clothing manufacturer Benetton has been embroiled in a brouhaha for its recent anti-death-penalty ad campaign called "We, on Death Row," a gushy concoction of glam shots and interviews with two dozen Death Row inmates, including four on Oregon's strip.

Benetton's campaign has provoked repulsion from some victims' families and others sickened by the perceived puffery.

Ellis and Abdill, Brandon Teena, Barry Winchell, Matthew Shepard, Billy Jack Gaither...

The queer community has seen some of its members shot, bludgeoned, burned and beaten. And it won't be the last time, either.

Given that, does the community feel invested in the debate over capital punishment? On the national level, perhaps.

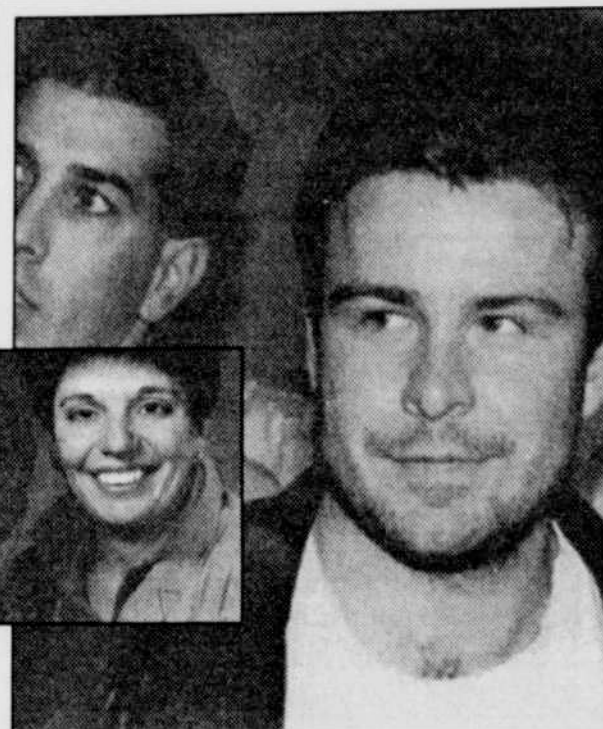
Shepard's murder galvanized some gay organizations to take a formal stand on the issue, most for the first time. One year ago, a national coalition of queer rights groups issued a joint statement strongly denouncing the death penalty. The action was spawned by prosecutors' decision to seek the death penalty in the cases of Russell Henderson and Aaron McKinney, who were eventually convicted of killing Shepard, a gay college student whose murder garnered worldwide attention.

The coalition included Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, the Lesbian and Gay Rights Project of the American Civil Liberties Union, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, and the National Latina/o LGBT Organization.

Among other points, members argued that the death penalty is disproportionately applied to poor people and people of color, is too expensive, and fails to be an effective deterrent against violent crime.

"The death penalty is applied in an inequitable way, and when factors of race, sexual orientation and income are taken into account, there is even more inequity. Mistakes happen and innocent people are sentenced to death. In those circumstances where the sentence has been carried out, the mistake cannot be reversed," said Kevin McGruder, executive director of Gay Men of African Descent.

Richard Haymes, executive director of the New York City Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project added: "As a victim services agency dealing with the physical and psychological aftermath of hatred against the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and HIV-positive community—our community—AVP understands full well the thirst for vengeance that heinous bias crimes often engender in the victim, his or her loved ones, and the community at large. However, as a human rights organization, AVP also views capital punishment as an act of state-sanctioned violence—an act that is no more or



Robert Acremant is on Oregon's Death Row for the murders of Roxanne Ellis and Michelle Abdill (inset)

less violent than the barbaric acts of our attackers—and we unequivocally oppose violence in every form, regardless of the perpetrator."

But one group begged to differ.

In January 1999, Log Cabin Republicans, a gay and lesbian GOP organization, dispatched a letter to queer publications nationwide that said, in part: "We were disheartened to read of growing sentiment among gay activists calling for prosecutors to seek a reduced punishment for Matthew Shepard's killers. They are forgetting the crucial importance of ensuring that gay Americans receive full justice under the laws of this country, without exception.... Punishing his killers to the fullest extent of the law will send an unmistakable message to every gay basher in America that they had better think twice before trying it, or they will face the hammer of justice. Nothing could speak louder to the purveyors of hate."

So here we are today, with a lesbian killer on Oregon's Death Row. Do queers in this state care one way or the other?

Some Oregonians do, and they've formed Life for a Life, a coalition headed up by former U.S. Sen. Mark Hatfield.

The group is promoting a proposed constitutional amendment to abolish the death penalty, swapping it for mandatory life sentences without possibility of parole. It must collect 89,048 valid signatures by July 7 to qualify the initiative for the November ballot.

Oregon's death penalty was reinstated in 1984. Two men have been executed during the past 16 years, and 25 others are currently on Death Row. Three of those inmates are ethnic minorities—two Hispanics and one Native American.

Capital punishment foe Sister Helen Pre-jean, author of *Dead Man Walking*—which became the acclaimed movie of the same name starring Susan Sarandon and Sean Penn—was in Portland in early February trying to spark interest in Life for a Life, which thus far has failed to stir the passions of the masses.

"I think it's a nonissue for a lot of people,"

surmises the Rev. Roy Cole, pastor of Metropolitan Community Church of Portland.

His denomination, he believes, has not taken an official stance on capital punishment.

Still, he says, "As a person of faith I am distressed by the death penalty. State-sanctioned violence doesn't facilitate the goal toward a peaceful society."

Trans activist Lori Buckwalter adds: "You do want to send a message that there are consequences, but not necessarily a consequence of a particular kind"—i.e., the death penalty.

Kelley Weigel is the co-director of Rural Organizing Project, a network of dozens of local human dignity groups throughout Oregon. ROP has bolstered a variety of social justice causes, from economic fairness to racial equality.

"There seems to be more momentum to take a stand on this," says Weigel. "Perhaps that conversation should start now from an organizational perspective."

Cecil Prescod of Brother to Brother, a Portland-area association of gay and bisexual African American men, says his group has not addressed the issue, though he believes that as the initiative campaign heats up more organizations may take a closer look at capital punishment.

"I think if Brother to Brother did take any kind of position, it would be because the death penalty is disproportionately applied to people of color, not necessarily because it's a queer issue," he says.

Both Weigel and Prescod suggest that a social justice movement can be strengthened when people and their myriad causes link together.

"Then we're talking about human rights," Prescod says.

But others say gay groups might want to stick to specifically gay-related issues.

Portland attorney Jerry Keene, who was on the Log Cabin Republicans board that crafted the Shepard letter, says: "Personally, I've always said that we should advocate for gay issues—not that alliances aren't important—but we should keep focused on our common goals rather than finding ways to divide ourselves."

Maura Roche of Basic Rights Oregon, the state's largest gay and lesbian political organization, says that's essentially BRO's formula as well.

"We tend to focus our energy and resources on issues related to sexual orientation," she tells *Just Out*.

Yet, while BRO has no position on the death penalty, it does posture in favor of reproductive freedoms.

"That's true. We have a position on choice," Roche concedes. "I think that's because [gay rights] and choice are closely tied to having control over your body and civil liberties."

People secure healing in different ways. Lori Ellis, daughter of Roxanne, told reporters she wanted to see Acremant get the death penalty.

Meanwhile, during McKinney's trial, Dennis Shepard, father of Matthew, told the court: "Matt believed that there were incidents and crimes that justified the death penalty.... I, too, believe in the death penalty. I would like nothing better than to see you die, Mr. McKinney. However, this is the time to begin the healing process. To show mercy to someone who refused to show any mercy. To use this as the first step in my own closure about losing Matt."

Notes MCC's Cole: "This is not an easy issue"

■ For questions or comments about *Just Out's* Northwest, national or world news coverage, please send an e-mail to News Editor INGA SORENSEN at [inga@justout.com](mailto:inga@justout.com).