

**NATIONAL news**

and gagged with their throats slit. Rice was indicted April 9 by a grand jury in Charlottesville, charged with four counts of capital murder, two of which allege that he chose his victims because of their gender and sexual orientation.

"The United States maintains that the defendant hated women and lesbians and that hatred was a motive for his killing," the indictment says. "The defendant stated intent that he intentionally selected women to intimidate and assault 'because they are more vulnerable than men'...that he 'hates gays' and that Julianne Williams and Laura Winans 'deserved to die because they were lesbian whores.'"

If these murders had occurred in almost any other place in the United States, the act could not have been used. Passed in 1994, it directs the U.S. Sentencing Commission to provide enhancements of "not less than three offense levels for offenses that the finder of fact at trial determines beyond a reasonable doubt are hate crimes."

**MISSISSIPPI**

Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund strongly denounced April 8 a letter to a newspaper by a Mississippi judge suggesting gay men and lesbians be institutionalized, and it agreed to represent a statewide civil rights group in an ethics complaint against him. "The letter is a clear statement of prejudice against gays and lesbians that calls into serious question whether the judge can decide cases fairly and impartially," attorney Greg Nevins said.

The *George County Times* published a letter to the editor March 28 from Mississippi Justice Court Judge Connie Glenn Wilkerson in which he writes, "In my opinion, gays and lesbians should be put in some type of mental institute instead of having a [domestic partnership] law like this passed for them." He was referring to a recent Associated Press article about the ability of gay and lesbian survivors to sue for the wrongful death of their partners.

"I got sick on my stomach as I read the news story," Wilkerson wrote. He also invoked the Bible and Romans 1:32, which suggests that those who break God's law "are worthy of death."

"Judge Wilkerson's letter shows that the era of bias and prejudice by Mississippi judges is not yet over, particularly for gays and lesbians," said Jody Renaldo, Equality Mississippi executive director. "The state is not served when its officials express bias against any group of people, and Judge Wilkerson needs to catch up with the times."

The Mississippi Code of Judicial Conduct specifically calls on judges to avoid "expressions of bias or prejudice," including demeaning remarks based on sexual orientation.

Wilkerson's remarks come on the heels of an opinion by Alabama Supreme Court Chief Justice

Roy Moore in which he called gay people "inherently destructive to the natural order of society." Lambda filed an ethics complaint against him, but the Alabama Judicial Inquiry Commission rejected it, claiming his comments are protected because they are part of a judicial opinion.

"We are extremely concerned about the rash of anti-gay statements from judges who are duty-bound to give a fair hearing to all," said Hector Vargas, Lambda Southern Regional Office director. "These kinds of statements make gays and lesbians feel that the justice system is closed off to them."

**NEW YORK**

The state Senate Judiciary Committee voted April 10 to open up family court to domestic partners, including same-sex and unmarried partners. Insiders say the 17-2 action is evidence of what might be a new openness toward this issue by members in the Republican majority.

Many victims of domestic violence are locked out of family court and its protections because the definition of "family" is limited to those who are married or share a child. Any couple who are not legally married or do not share a child instead must rely on criminal court, which is not nearly as well equipped for protection orders and other legal devices.

According to the New York City Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project, almost one in three intimate same-sex relationships experiences some form of domestic violence—a level almost identical to heterosexual couples. "Just the fact that gay men and lesbians in abusive relationships are denied access to these services simply due to their inability to marry is an inequity the state needs to address once and for all," said Ross Levi, Empire State Pride Agenda legislative counsel.

The next step for the legislation and its companion bill in the Assembly is a floor vote in their respective chambers. Gov. George Pataki is expected to sign the measure.

"For too long now, there have been two sets of rules in New York for victims of violence in the home," said Joe Grabarz, Empire State Pride Agenda executive director. "The state should not be in the business of picking those victims it wishes to protect and those it does not." □

Compiled by News Editor JIM RADOSTA, who can be reached at jim@justout.com.



Ross Levi

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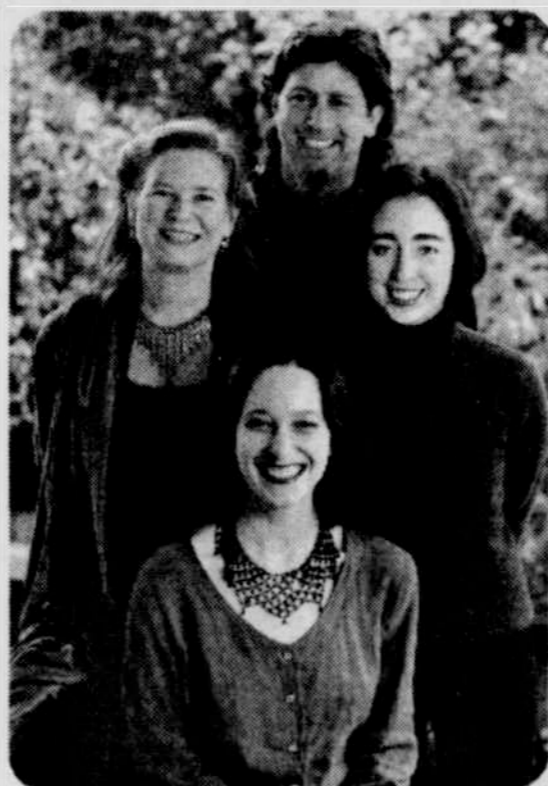
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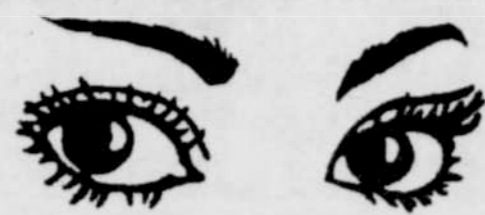
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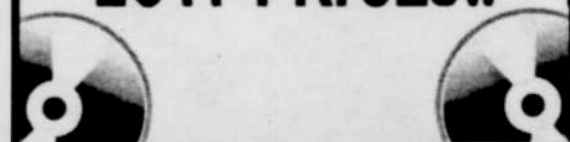
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