

Suspicious of corruption remain in Robeson County

By HELLE NIELSEN
Staff Writer

Robeson County residents were surprised but pleased by the acquittals of Eddie Hatcher and Timothy Jacobs, who were charged in the takeover of a Robeson County newspaper, but questions about corruption and discrimination in the county's legal system remain, residents said in interviews this week.

Hatcher and Jacobs were acquitted of all federal hostage-taking and weapons charges stemming from the takeover of The Robesonian newspaper Feb. 1, when they held 20 people hostage for about 10 hours.

Throughout the men's trial, defense lawyers argued that the Tuscarora Indians acted to save their lives, because they had information linking law enforcement officers to drug trafficking.

The hostage-taking helped generate positive changes in the county such as the establishment of a dispute resolution center, which will increase awareness of injustices in the legal system, said the Rev. Robert Lee

Mangum of Pembroke.

"There will never be a perception that the county is clean until we have a thorough investigation and a thorough airing of the whole issue of corruption," Mangum said.

The acquittals could help bring evidence about law enforcement officers' involvement in drug trafficking into the open, said Jennifer Mickels, a community organizer with the Rural Advancement Fund in Lumberton.

"If Hatcher and Jacobs had been found guilty, people would have been less likely to come forward with information they have," Mickels said. "Now that they were sort of blessed, people may come forward a little bit easier. It can enhance organizing efforts."

The acquittals were a victory for poor people and for those "traditionally oppressed," Mickels said.

Many of The Robesonian's employees and some county residents were enraged by the acquittals, but many others felt corruption in the

county's law enforcement system drove the two to take action, Mangum said.

"Many believe... the boys were desperate and felt they could not trust anyone with the information they had," he said. "They felt they had to do something desperate to stop what they felt was cancerous corruption in Robeson County."

Defense lawyer Lewis Pitts applauded the jury for being courageous and for "sticking by the law" in recognizing Hatcher and Jacobs did not act with criminal intent but in self-defense.

Assistant U.S. Attorney John Bruce, who prosecuted the case, called the acquittals "a failure of advocacy" on his part.

The hostages' side of the story was largely untold before the trial, Bruce said. "I believe anyone who was present in the courtroom when they testified would realize that there was real terror in that situation on Feb. 1," he said.

The verdict was not a political one, Pitts said, but it did imply "some

judgment on the conditions in Robeson County."

Defense attorneys had hoped to shed light on allegations about county officials' involvement in drug trafficking through testimony from people with first-hand knowledge of the situation, including Robeson County Sheriff Hubert Stone. But U.S. District Judge Terrence Boyle overturned an earlier decision and ruled the necessity defense, preventing the defense from calling most of its witnesses.

In affidavits submitted by the defense, two Robeson ministers, Mangum and the Rev. Jerry Lowry, both said they had been contacted by constituents involved in drug trafficking.

"(A) person came to me in confidence within the last year seeking spiritual counseling," Lowry said. "This person reiterated what had already been told to me by other persons with similar first-hand knowledge and involvement: that cocaine was plentiful in Robeson

County, and county law enforcement officials were participants in this trafficking."

The same person called the sheriff's department with information about a drug deal, but the department showed no interest in the information, Lowry said.

Some members of the sheriff's department also may have told drug suspects about upcoming law enforcement raids so they could avoid arrest, Lowry said.

Defense lawyers have criticized the FBI drug task force for failing to indict major drug dealers despite two years of investigations in the county.

If the task force had used its powers fully, including the possibility to grant witnesses immunity from prosecution, they should have been able to gather enough evidence for indictments, Pitts said.

"The cocaine dealing in Robeson County is so open and well known that if (the FBI) were acting in good faith they could have cleared it up," Pitts said.

Assistant U.S. Attorney William

Webb, head of the drug task force, told UNC law professor Barry Nakell last spring that he would hand down 40 indictments on Robeson County drug trafficking charges in August, Nakell said. In August, Webb said the indictments would be filed in September, but nothing has happened since, Nakell said.

Webb said he never told Nakell about the indictments. "I never said that to anybody, any place," Webb said. "We have been seeking and obtaining indictments for the last two years. It has been an ongoing process."

The acquittal of former Robeson Deputy Sheriff Mitchell Stevens illustrated the difficulty of prosecuting law enforcement officials relying on drug dealers' testimony, Webb said.

"I learned that when you try somebody like a law enforcement officer and use somebody who admitted to being a drug dealer, it is very difficult to obtain a conviction," he said.



The Chapel Hill Coalition for Freedom to Dissent held a rally in the Pit Thursday to protest restrictions on student expression at UNC. DTH/Becky Kirkland

Rally

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ing his political beliefs is wrong," he said. "That shouldn't happen in the United States. It happens in the Soviet Union. It shouldn't happen here."

Students should care about what happened to McKinley because it could just as easily happen to them, Sandler said.

"The point is not that Dale McKinley will suffer," he said. "The point is that we will suffer if we don't protest what is going on. When the civil liberties of any student are threatened, the civil liberties of all students are threatened."

The length of McKinley's sentence is disproportionate to his offense, said Jurgen Buchenau, an International Action member and Student Congress representative.

"A person can get 21 days for cutting up someone's face in a state of drunkenness," he said. "This is like being punished for a felony."

Diana McDuffee, a representative of the Carolina Interfaith Task Force, said the Honor Court has been misled by the University, which is supporting the CIA.

"The Honor Court is being used as an instrument of repression by the University," she said.

Students are losing their freedom to dissent and should act upon that, said Graham Entwistle, a UNC student who was arrested and charged with disorderly conduct with McKinley on Oct. 28, 1987. Entwistle, McKinley and other student protesters chained themselves together to block the entrance to rooms in Hanes Hall where CIA recruiters were conducting interviews.

"The right to dissent is slowly being squelched on this campus," Entwistle said. "The freedom to dissent is a time-honored tradition that is now becoming an honor of doing time."

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