

The Front Page

May 22-June 4, 1984

Vol. V, No. 9

Victims Become Heroes & Testify

Robert, a 27-year old gay man, left the bar on Front Street in Wilmington on the night of July 19. There were several girls sitting on his car, and a couple of men leaning against the outside wall of the tavern. He got in his car and drove to a stop sign. One of the men who had been in front of the tavern waved, and approached the car.

The man said he had been drinking and "would appreciate it" if someone would follow him home. "He said he lived in Leland and we could party when we got to his house," Robert recently testified.

"We went toward Leland," he told Brunswick County Superior Court earlier this month, "then he turned down a one-lane road," near an abandoned packing house. "I started getting a bad feeling, so I wrote down his license number and put it in the glove compartment.

"I finally found a place to pull in and turn around. About that time I saw headlights coming toward me and I was blocked in." A second car had been following him with its headlights out.

In this second car, were Donald Herring, 23, and Joseph Meyer, 27. The man in the first car, Mark Watts, who had asked Robert to follow him, is one of six defendants charged in this and a similar incident. (Jonathan Darrell Wooten, 24, Timothy Efird, and David Stowell are the others).

Once he was blocked in, Robert said, "That's when Herring got out of his car, pointed a gun through the windshield at my face and said 'Faggot, you have just taken your last ride.' I just floored it. The bullet shattered the back side window. It must have missed my head by inches."

His car crashed into an embankment and stopped. "Someone unlocked the door through the broken window," he said, and took the keys to the car. "They pulled me out, hit me in the face, kicked me down the embankment."

He said he was beaten and kicked several times, but wasn't sure which of the men were kicking him. "I kept crawling," he told the court. "All I knew was there were a bunch of people behind me wanting to kill me."

He scrambled through the woods until he found a tree with thick vines growing around it, then climbed until he was hidden by foliage. "I could hear them all around me, looking for me, for about 10 minutes," he said. "This was about 2 a.m. I stayed in the tree until the sun came up."

Meanwhile, his car was ransacked, and several items stolen. He told the court that, in addition to his car keys, a wallet with \$75, a timing light, spare tire, half bag of marijuana and fender skirts were stolen from his car.

When morning came, Robert reached a phone in New Hanover County and called Brunswick and New Hanover police. He was told to meet a Brunswick County deputy at Parker's (a restaurant) in Leland at 10am.

Robert, at 6 feet 2 inches and 165 pounds, told the *Wilmington Star* he was never afraid to talk to strangers before the assault. He is more cautious now. "I guess I learned you just can't trust everybody," he explained to *Star* staff writer Deborah Kelly. "I believed this guy. Men aren't taught to be fearful. Some people are out just to be mean. I guess they get off on it. I know now."

"You just can't let people do that"

Robert, who asked to be identified only by his first name, was one of two Wilmington gay men who recently testified in court that they were beaten up for sport. They both told the *Star* that their court appearance was difficult, but they would go through it again to spare others the same fate.

"At first, when I thought about the things it would bring out, I was leery of it," Robert said. "Some of my friends said I should just forget about it. But there was no question in my mind they had to be prosecuted, because it could happen again and again. You just can't let people do that."

The second victim, a 23-year-old man who was assaulted August 29, agreed: "It was the thought that these fellows had done this to me and to someone else. How many more times would they do it? How many others had they already done it to? I didn't want it to happen to any of my friends."

One separate occasions last summer, each of the two men was lured to a remote area of Brunswick County by a single man, then trapped by three to four others on lonely, one-

lane roads, where they were beaten, shot at, kicked and robbed.

Second Victim Hospitalized

The second victim testified that he was sitting on the balcony at St. John's Art Gallery in Wilmington around 1am when four men drove by in two separate cars, who he identified as Meyer, Herring, Wooten and Efird.

He said he walked to his home, about four blocks from the art gallery, got his car and went down to Chandler's Wharf, where he was sitting on the hood of his car when Herring and Meyer pulled up in a red Camaro. Meyer invited him to go to a party in Southport, he testified.

As with Robert before, the second victim followed them in his car and several miles down Highway 133, they turned onto a dirt logging road, stopped and blocked the road. A second car came up from behind and blocked any exit, he said.

Meyer came up to his blocked car, he told the court, and said, "You've had your last ride." He said Herring pointed a gun at him and told him to get out of the car.

He reached for his pistol on the floorboard of the car, he told the court, when Herring shot into his car shattering the rear window. He then rolled his side window down and threw his pistol out in hopes that "they wouldn't shoot at me any more."

He said he started to get out of the car when he was struck on the head. He said several men struck him and shoved him into a ditch, and as he was falling he felt one of them take his wallet and a gold chain he was wearing around his neck. Meyer apparently went into the ditch after him, and continued beating him until he lost consciousness.

When he came to, he testified that his checkbook, a gold diamond ring and a backpack were also taken, in addition to all his keys except the ignition key. No one was around and three tires were slashed, he said.

He made his way to Highway 133, where he hitched a ride to New Hanover Memorial Hospital, where he was admitted and hospitalized for three days after the attack, suffering a concussion, a fractured facial bone, a bruised kidney and abrasions.

District Attorney Michael F. Easley said the attackers thought they would get away with their crimes because the victims would be embarrassed to testify. "Good criminals know how to pick their prey. They will pick old people, women who are scared to testify after they are raped."

Alex Hall, attorney for the accused Herring, asked the jury to consider how the second victim got to the scene of the crime, "with his tight blue jeans and his earring in his ear and his leather vest."

"How many of you cruise the neighborhoods at 2 in the morning?" Hall asked in his closing arguments.

Robert commented to the *Star*: "If this had happened to an old lady, would Hall have defended them the same way? It just never made any sense to me. I don't think the fact that someone is a homosexual has anything to do with it."

The second victim agreed. "This issue was not 'Are you gay?' but 'Did these people beat you up and rob you?'" he said.

In his closing arguments, District Attorney Easley compared the defendants to a "pack of wolves," and said that their actions were the result of "depraved minds... the same type of mind that rapists have, that bigots have." Superior Court Judge Thomas Watts called both men "extremely dangerous."

Contrary to his fears, Robert said, testifying "wasn't nearly as bad as what anyone would think it would be. I was afraid that everyone would have the attitude that Alex Hall had — that I asked for it, that I deserved it. Hall was trying to justify the wrong that his client did because we were homosexual. As though it were okay for them to harm us in any way they wanted."

Herring and Meyer, were convicted of the attacks in Brunswick County Superior Court in April and sentenced to 23 and 25 years, respectively. Wooten, pleaded guilty to conspiracy and robbery and is awaiting sentencing. (In exchange for his lesser sentence, Wooten agreed to testify against the other men.) The three others — Watts, Stowell, and Efird — are scheduled to be tried the week of May 21.

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