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Racist Acquitted in Shelby Murders

Douglas Lawrence Sheets, a former member of a white supremacist group, was found not guilty of three murder charges in connection with a gay-related shooting and firebombing. He was also acquitted of an arson charge and assault with intent to kill.

The jury in Sheets' trial deliberated for over five hours on May 26 before returning to Cleveland County Superior Court and announcing their verdict in the incident at a Shelby, N.C. adult bookstore more than two years ago which left three men dead and two injured.

Sheets was originally charged with 16 counts. In the trial he faced five charges: three counts of first-degree murder, one count of arson and one count of assault with a deadly weapon.

As jurors returned to the courtroom, according to an Associated Press report (*News & Observer*, 5/27/89), several were crying. The families of the victims ran from the courtroom crying.

"This is a hard case to lose, but I thought the jury could have gone either way," said Mab Segrest, former executive director of North Carolina Against Racist and Religious Violence. The prosecution had two White Patri

from prison and not a lot of physical evidence to back up all their testimony.

"It's not as though this jury let him off in the face of incontrovertible evidence," she said. "I think if there had been a stronger case, the role homophobia played in the jury's decision would be clearer."

The lack of a witness who could place Sheets in the area on that night hurt the state's case, the prosecutor said. Those who testified said they had learned of Sheets' role from Sheets himself. Four had been in jail with him.

"I would have preferred having Sunday school teachers as witnesses," District Attorney Bill Young said.

Sheets, who admitted his former involvement with the Ku Klux Klan and the White Patriot Party, went on trial for the slayings before an all-white jury on May 5.

Robert Jackson was scheduled for trial on the same charges, but Young would not divulge whether to go to trial.

Kenneth Godfrey, 29, and Tom Rutherford County —

died after three masked men entered the store on January 17, 1987, ordered them to the floor and shot them in the head.

Two men, James Parris and John Anthony, survived and gave investigators some details of the attack. Evidence at the trial included emotional testimony by Parris, a South Carolina resident. He described a night of terror in which the killers hurled abusive language at the five men as they set up firebombs, robbed the store of cash, forced the men to lie down on the floor, and shot them each in the head, several as many as four times.

Parris was unable to identify Sheets as one of the attackers. The three men wore ski masks, and Parris said he never saw any of their faces, according to the *Shelby Star* (5/6/89).

The bookstore had received at least two threats before the shootings, including one only hours before the murders. Two men had entered a bookstore booth together to watch a sexually explicit movie, according to another patron, Leslie Dean Watts of Forest City. When the store's clerk, Jerry Melton, knocked on the door of the booth and informed the men that only one person was supposed to be in a booth, one of the men grabbed

the clerk by the shirt and said, "you're a faggot and a queer," Watts said. "The man shoved Melton and said, 'Faggot, I'll be back for your ass,'" Watts testified, according to the *Star* (5/13/89), adding "it scared the living daylights out of me."

Murder victims were the bookstore clerk, Melton, and patrons Paul Weston and Kenneth Godfrey, all dead at the scene. Injured were Parris and a second man, John Anthony.

Members of the victims' families broke down during Parris's graphic account of the events that night. "After I laid down, I heard some shots," Parris said. "Then I heard a voice I didn't recognize say, 'You don't have to do all this. Please, don't do this.' And someone said, 'Are you a goddam faggot, too? Get down.'" The shooting continued, Parris said, as someone was directed to go light the charges on the firebombs. "Then he said, 'Give me your lighter, I forgot mine.'"

Parris fought tears throughout his testimony, according to the *Charlotte Observer* (5/6/89). He described his own shooting, which has left him sightless in one eye. Parris, a military veteran,

continued on page 5

Internal Conflicts Challenge LGHP

A narrowly-averted financial disaster and the resignation of their executive director have brought Durham's Lesbian and Gay Health Project (LGHP) to a crisis point, according to current LGHP board members, former LGHP volunteer leaders and other AIDS support movement workers across the state. Board members blame growing pains, negative publicity in *The Front Page*, hostile rumors and an explosive letter from AIDS Service Coalition spokesman David Jones as the reasons the group's problems, including the departure of Jill Duvall, the group's first and only executive director, after a stormy three-year tenure. But volunteers and outside observers cite the Board's hesitancy to confront two years of ongoing problems as the real root of the recent turmoil.

Despite outside pressure from the media and a recent meeting demanded by the leadership of the AIDS Community Residence Association, specific information about the degree of the financial problems and the exact reasons the board refused to let Duvall rescind her resignation have not been addressed by LGHP board leadership. Dante Noto, co-chair of the board, said that rumors of the money problems have been greatly exaggerated.

"It's not true that the Health Project was ever broke," he said. He denied any direct connection between the financial crisis and the board's

decision to accept Duvall's resignation. She was never asked to resign by the board, Noto said.

"Quitting was one way of letting us know how hurt she was and how stressed she was" from three factors: the financial situation, criticism of her job performance from outside the Health Project, and the lack of board support after a March 7 article in *The Front Page* that caused controversy throughout the AIDS support community, Noto said. Duvall had given the Board a resignation, then asked to stay on in the executive director position. They decided to refuse that request because such behavior was "manipulative" and "unprofessional," Noto said. "You can't screw around with us" by creating the confusion of resigning, Noto added, explaining that Duvall had resigned and reconsidered once before.

The issues of criticism and lack of board support arose over the reaction to *Front Page* article, "Women in the AIDS Movement Face Criticism from Within and Without," in which Duvall spoke frankly of her perceptions of the problems she faced as a woman in AIDS leadership and as the only female head of a AIDS Service Organization in North Carolina.

Most of the controversy centered around Duvall's comments that, even in the wake of the AIDS crisis, little change had occurred the

attitudes towards classism, sexism and other prejudices still prevalent among the gay white men with whom she worked.

"It's still the same damn community," Duvall said in the article. Her comments were perceived by Jones, who works as a lobbyist in the General Assembly, and others as indicating that Duvall believed gay men are not modifying their sexual behavior to prevent transmission of the AIDS virus.

Jones said that he was angry and wrote a letter to Duvall stating his strong objections to her remarks and asking her to resign.

"It was a letter to her and not to her board," he said. "I asked her to resign based on a long history of her political views restraining the organization... and huge amounts of turmoil" during her time in the executive director's role. "Her politics interfered with the delivery of services" that LGHP is supposed to provide, Jones said.

Nancy Thompson, the health project's other co-chair, said that Duvall's comments in the article "displayed very clearly that the board does not have a good support system for the executive director." She said that competition for funding and other outside pressures create a high degree of stress for the director and that Duvall needed a strong sense that the board was behind her "so it

wasn't her against the world."

In the face of what Duvall saw as insufficient defense, Thompson said, "she got personally tired of being on the front lines."

Noto said that Duvall's comments in the article reflected her frustration with the position, and that she was unprepared for "the outcry against the article from the community." There was a great deal of backlash from within and without the health project, Noto said. "Everybody I knew had read that article and wondered what the hell was going on."

Jones' letter exacerbated Duvall's belief that she needed stronger board support, Noto said. "He let everyone know just how dissatisfied he was and brought a great deal of pressure to bear on Jill."

Duvall could not be reached for comment. Neither Noto nor Thompson would pinpoint why the financial problems became suddenly obvious or exactly how bad the financial picture had gotten in January of this year, when the board started to examine the cash situation in detail. Both cite a variety of factors as the cause of the problems: an annual Christmas mail solicitation whose profit fell far below anticipations, a benefit concert that required extensive pre-event cash outlay, the rejection of several LGHP grant

continued on page 11

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