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Pride '89: Gay Rights, Shelby Connected

By Janelle Lavelle

Twenty years after the first rebellion at Stonewall, gay people in North Carolina are fighting for the right to be protected from harassment, intimidation and murder based on their sexual orientation. And they are even going to have to battle Sen. Jesse Helms' efforts to block the legal documentation that such anti-gay activity exists in an upcoming vote in the U.S. Senate.

Pride '89 will focus on three related events — the 1988 N.C. Human Rights Fund report on homophobic behavior in the state, the acquittal of a white supremacist in Shelby, N.C., for the murder of three men perceived to be gay, and the upcoming national Hate Crime legislative battle — as gay men and lesbians from across the state convene in Raleigh for a march and rally on Saturday, June 24, according to Pride '89 organizer Mandy Carter. The Pride leadership will hold a press conference on Thursday, June 22, to highlight the relationship between the March and these issues.

Shelby: A Lack of Physical Evidence

The battle against anti-gay violence was given a new urgency with the acquittal of Douglas Sheets for the murders of three men, the wounding of two others and the fire-bombing of the Shelby III adult bookstore, a known gathering place for gay men from six rural N.C. and S.C. counties. The January 17, 1987, murders were the most obvious and frightening incident of anti-gay North Carolina violence in generations. The local prosecutor's office in Shelby has decided to drop charges against a second man charged in the attacks, according to the *Raleigh News and Observer* (6/3/89). The evidence against the second man, Robert Eugene Jackson, "is the same evidence that we used against Sheets," said Cleveland County District Attorney Bill Young.

Response from the gay community and their civil rights allies was immediate. A coalition of gay-supportive groups, including the North Carolinians Against Racist and Religious Violence (NCARRV), the N.C. Human Rights Fund, Wilmington's umbrella gay and lesbian organization GROW, the N.C. AIDS Service Coalition, and the N.C. Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality, united to present a petition to Governor Jim Martin on Friday, June 2, in an attempt to prevent further anti-gay violence, according to the *Durham Morning Herald* (5/29/89).

"We need to stand and voice our protests demanding protection from hate violence," said Eleanor Holland of NCARRV. The petition asked Martin to make anti-gay violence a major part of the agenda of the governor's task force for racist and religious violence. The task force, headed by Eddie Knox of Charlotte, is in disarray; the group recommended several important legislative changes this session, but none were passed or even seriously considered in the 1989 General Assembly.

Mab Segrest, who monitored most of the trial for NCARRV, said that it was never disputed even by the defense that the murders and the firebombing had been committed by Nazis. "The Nazis were just arguing about which one did it," she said, adding that the trial and verdict pointed out the continuing problem with hate crime violence in the state.

As the all-white Shelby jury deliberated for 5-1/2 hours, vigils were held in Greensboro, Winston-Salem and Durham to call attention to the importance the state's gay and lesbian community placed upon the outcome of the trial. In the closing arguments, the defendant's lawyers emphasized that the trial was not about Sheets' political beliefs. "Sheets admitted he had undesirable associates, but he's not on trial for that," defense attorney Les Farfour said, according to the *Durham Morning Herald* (5/26/89). "It's a dangerous thing when we put people on trial on the basis of things they may or may not believe."

District Attorney Young and NCARRV's Segrest both said that the absence of physical evidence, and the inability of the state's witnesses to identify the attackers, weakened the state's case against Sheets.

As the defense attorneys left the courtroom, one victim's mother, Betty Godfrey, screamed at them, "I hope they have children and someone murders them like he [Sheets] murdered my son. I hope you go through the same thing I did." Other family members, some of whom believed from the beginning that the trial should have been moved from the Shelby community to a more neutral area, were equally bitter about the verdict.

The primary evidence against Sheets was his alleged confessions to other prison inmates and fellow white extremists of his part in the murders. The district attorney said after the trial that he would have been happier if he had had a few "Sunday school teachers" rather than convicted felons as the witnesses for the state.

One of the most bizarre aspects of the trial testimony was the first introduction in a North Carolina trial of the beliefs of the religion to which Sheets subscribes. Identity Christianity, a fast-developing extremist fundamentalist sect in the western and southwestern parts of the country, teaches that homosexuals should be put to death, according to Identity pastor Peter Peters of Colorado. Identity adherents also believe in racial purity and the tenet that the U.S. government is run by a cabal of Jewish Zionists, one-world advocates, and communist infiltrators determined to destroy U.S. integrity.

Identity teaches that the Jews are not really the "chosen people" of the Bible, and that the Aryan race was the true recipient of the mantle of special selection by God, using a complicated explanation revolving around ancient Saxon warlords and other representatives of pure white blood lines. Identity is a unifying theology for white

supremacists across the country, including the Order, the Aryan Nation and others involved in violent hate crimes against gay people, blacks and Jews. It is just beginning to make inroads into traditional fundamentalism in the Southeast.

This religious underpinning for hate-group violence was extensively reported by Public Television's Bill Moyers in a special three-part series in 1987, and the sect has been steadily growing in membership ever since, although actual Identity strength has been impossible to determine. The Shelby trial was the first time Identity was a factor in a N.C. hate-group case.

Helms Leading Hate Crimes Opposition

Organizers for Pride '89 see obvious parallels between the Shelby verdict and the importance of federal legislation designed to monitor hate crimes against all racial, religious and ethnic groups, Pride organizer Carter said. The legislation's most powerful opponent is Helms, who is expected to introduce an amendment to the Hate Crimes bill deleting anti-gay violence as a type of crime to be monitored, Carter said.

A North Carolina bill designed to study hate activity, HB 588, is currently languishing in the House Law Enforcement and Public Safety Subcommittee and is not expected to pass either house this session. The degree of committee

support for the bill is still unknown. Like every other gay and AIDS-related bill during this General Assembly session, opposition to monitoring gay hate crime is based on the idea that all gay people are felons under the Crime Against Nature laws and thus undeserving of such protection.

It is currently impossible to track accurately anti-gay violence in the state or the nation because the FBI's crime statistics do not include a breakdown for gay-related crime. Most local law enforcement agencies — metropolitan police departments and rural sheriff's offices — follow the FBI guidelines. Anti-gay violence is lumped in with other murder, assault and related crime categories.

NCARRV observers and other civil rights groups have compared the Shelby verdict to the famous acquittal of Nazis and Klansmen who were photographed murdering several members of the Communist Workers Party in Greensboro in November, 1979. Segrest and others pointed out, however, that the Shelby case relied on far less physical evidence than the Greensboro trials.

Hate-crime monitoring legislation at both the federal and state levels is seen by NCARRV and other civil rights activists as essential to determining a more exact level of anti-gay hate

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Greensboro Groups Support Discrimination Hearings

"You made a happy 20,000 people today," was Marnie Thompson's reassurance to the Greensboro Human Relations Commission after the group voted unanimously to join with the Greensboro Council on the Status of Women and call on the City Council to hold public hearings on anti-gay violence, harassment and discrimination.

But the HRC went a step further at the request of Thompson, spokesperson for the Guilford Alliance for Gay and Lesbian Equality, and recommended that the City consider amending city ordinances to provide specific protection from discrimination.

They also decided to tell the City once again that they support changing Greensboro's personnel policy to protect gay men and lesbians from harassment in city jobs, despite notification from the city manager's office that the proposal had been rejected by the city administration.

The HRC had proposed the personnel policy change, along with nine other recommendations, last December after over nine months of work on gay and lesbian issues. The city manager, Bill Carstophen, turned down the three most critical recommendations, Alliance members said, including one that would direct the city to give special

training to police officers about dealing with gay people.

"Are you going to let your own recommendations lie on the cutting-room floor?", Thompson said she asked the HRC. When one commission member suggested a further study of the issue, HRC member and outgoing chair Mike Diamond said that they had already looked at it, discussed it, and stated their support. "Let's say we believe in it," Diamond said.

The Council on the Status of Women voted to call for public hearings on anti-gay violence in their March 21 meeting. "Although this is not specifically a women's issue, women are involved," said Linda Jones, a CSW member who will take the recommendation to the city council. "We felt there would be no harm and hopefully a lot of good to come out of a public hearing."

Jones said that her personal belief was that gay men and lesbians are facing the same struggle that women fought for equal protection. The same argument women confronted that they are "already included because everyone is included" is

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