

Did hate kill Bob Gross?

Activists question murder of Lansing sportswriter

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BY ANNE HARRIS



photo: Rosemary Ruppert

The murder of Bob Gross was discussed in an historic meeting between Lansing community activists and police on July 25.

LANSING - Bob Gross, a beloved Lansing sports writer, lived his life in the closet and would have remained there if not for the circumstances of his death. Gross, 59, was found murdered in his home on June 26. Many gay and lesbian activists have termed the killing an anti-gay bias crime.

Employees of Rudy Stober's Bar at 812 E. Michigan Avenue report that Gross left the bar with another man around 1:30 a.m. on the day of his death. Gross' body was found later that morning by firefighters who came to his 624 W. Ottawa residence to put out a fire. He had been strangled with a lamp cord and stabbed repeatedly. Police believe the fire was set in

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photo: Rosemary Ruppert

Lansing Police Chief, Jerome Boles: "We have the discretion to change the classification if new information is made available to us."

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an attempt to cover up the killing.

Robert Neil Durfee, 28, was charged with Gross' murder on June 27. Durfee, who was released on parole eight days before the killing, was apprehended driving Gross' car in the Hildebrandt Park Apartment complex in the 3100 block of Turner Street.

But neither fire nor bigotry can erase the facts of Bob Gross' life. A sports writer for the Lansing State Journal for 34 years, Gross was a well-loved public figure known for his support of high school athletics. He was also a very private individual who kept his sexual orientation under wraps. "It is widely known that Bob Gross was a gay man who chose to be very low key," said a long-term friend of Gross, "He preferred to appear as a member of straight society. He was from the old school."

Reports of Gross' death in the Lansing State Journal made no mention of his sexual orientation, but Gross was

"outed" posthumously by the Detroit-based Triangle Foundation. On July 5 Triangle posted this headline: "A gay man was murdered in Lansing on 26 June 1996. Robert Joseph Gross was killed in Lansing," on its World Wide Web home page. The web page also carried a letter from Triangle President Jeff Montgomery to Lansing Police Chief

Jerome Boles and Ingham County Prosecutor Don Martin criticizing them for failing to identify Gross' murder as an anti-gay bias crime.

"To cover it up makes the environment for lesbians and gays even more dangerous," said Montgomery of his decision to make Gross' sexual orientation public.

"People are routinely put in harm's way strictly because they are gay. If that is not made known through police agencies and newspapers those people are failing in their obligation to protect the public."

Lansing activist Bob Egan was also disappointed with the Lansing State Journal's coverage of the crime. "An opportunity was missed to recognize him as a gay man who made a significant contribution to his community," said Egan.

At a meeting between the Police Community Relations Advisory Committee and the lesbian and gay community on July 25, Egan asked detectives if Gross' death was a bias crime. They responded that the details of the case did not warrant it being labeled as such, but left open the possibility that it might later be classified as a bias crime if further evidence came out in the trial. Detective Owen Deatrick, the lead investigator on the case, said that hate was not

the motivating factor in the crime. He believes the principle motive was robbery.

"I have had numerous conversations with the officers involved and I'm not sure either way that this is a hate crime," said Egan. "I am personally confident that they will see this case through. I have the utmost confidence in the Lansing Police Department at this time," he added.

Others in the community are not as confident. "Deatrick is basing his view on the evidence, but we don't have the evidence," said Cheryl VanDeKerkhove, a Lansing activist and owner of the Real World Emporium, where the meeting was held. VanDeKerkhove said that the approach the Lansing Police are taking on the case is "testing our trust."

"Because something has robbery as part of the motive does not mean that it can't have something else as a motive," said Montgomery, who adds that Gross' murder fits the profile of what is commonly known as a "pick-up" crime, in which the perpetrator makes the acquaintance of the victim in a bar or other gay gathering place and lures him or her in under the pretext of a sexual encounter.

"Why did he (the perpetrator) feel that Mr. Gross was an appropriate or an easy target? The risk of targeting him is very low for the perpetrator and that is what anti-gay motivation is all about," said Montgomery.

"We have a long way to go before law enforcement recognizes pickup crimes as bias crimes," Bea Hanson, director of client services for the New York Anti-gay Violence Project, told Between The Lines. "Once they identify a motive they tend to minimize other possible motives and those are very important for us as a community."

A report on gay related homicides from 1992 to 1994 compiled by the project found that overkill (continued mutilation of a body after death) was present in sixty percent of the cases. Because Gross was strangled to death and then stabbed repeatedly, and because it was a pick-up crime, Hanson said she would consider the Gross murder anti-



gay. "I've never heard nationally that pickup crimes are considered bias crimes but I can't imagine them as anything else."

Chief Boles told Between The Lines that Gross' sexual orientation was a factor in his murder, and added that it "should be a consideration" in the investigation. However, Boles said that the police department must adhere to the federal guidelines for classifying bias crime. Those guidelines, used by the FBI to track anti-lesbian/gay motivation include: "an offenders use of anti-gay or AIDS-related language; a history of anti-lesbian/gay incidents in the same area; a perception by a substantial portion of the lesbian/gay community where the crime occurred that the incident was motivated by bias; a coincidence with a lesbian/gay event, such as Lesbian/Gay Pride Day or National Coming Out Day; some indication that the victim was selected for victimization because of his/her appearance, clothing or behavior; the victim's participation in activities promoting lesbian/gay rights, or activities in response to AIDS."

But because Gross was gay, legally labeling his murder a bias crime would not increase the penalties. At this time Michigan does not have a state law concerning anti-gay bias crime. When he was a state senator, Governor John Engler had the sexual orientation language removed from the state's Ethnic Intimidation law, which covers bias crime. A task force appointed by the Michigan Civil Rights Commission has recommended that sexual orientation be included in the law. The task force made their recommendations to the Governor on May 20.

"The closet is a dangerous place to be," said Egan. "This just shows that the work has to go on."

Tim Retzloff contributed to this report.