

Hearts and Voices
Michelle Abdill and Roxanne Ellis
Identified as lesbians
By George T. Nicola
Last updated 3/3/2013 1:45 PM



Roxanne Ellis and Michelle Abdill

Roxanne Kay Ellis and Michelle Abdill were lesbian partners who settled in the southern Oregon town of Medford, Jackson County, in 1990. They had moved there from Colorado Springs, a city they found was becoming increasingly hostile toward gays. In Medford, they established a successful property management service.

The couple also became part of a community of gay men and lesbians who had relocated to southern Oregon from big West Coast cities. The Los Angeles Times reported that the women “gave lectures at the schools on lesbian lifestyles and appeared on TV on behalf of local gay rights causes.” (http://articles.latimes.com/1995-12-20/news/ls-15918_1_small-town-values) According to lesbian activist Donna Redwing, Roxanne and Michelle also helped care for a couple of men who were dying of AIDS.

In 1992, both the Medford and Jackson County became embroiled in anti-gay politics. It started with a statewide initiative called Ballot Measure 9, sponsored by a group called the Oregon Citizen’s Alliance (OCA). That initiative would have amended the Oregon constitution to forbid any civil rights protection based on sexual orientation. It also grouped homosexuality with pedophilia, requiring that public schools teach that these practices were “abnormal, wrong, unnatural, and perverse and that these behaviors are to be discouraged and avoided”. (http://www.co.benton.or.us/admin/elections/documents/archives/1990s/e92g/e92g_svp.pdf). (http://www.lgbthatecrimes.org/doku.php?id=abdill_and_ellis)

Fortunately, Measure 9 failed. However, the OCA returned with local initiatives similar to Measure 9. Both the City of Medford and Jackson County passed their measures by wide margins. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oregon_Citizens_Alliance)

Roxanne and Michelle fought valiantly against OCA measures. But Michelle’s mother later told *The Oregonian* newspaper that those efforts were not what defined her daughter. “That’s just who she was,” her mother said. “It was not her driving force. She was not a militant, but she was firm.”

In December of 1995, Michelle, 42, and Roxanna, 53, were found shot to death. “Their bodies”, *The Oregonian* reported, “were left in the back of Ellis’ canopied pickup in a parking lot of a Medford apartment complex.” They had been missing several days. (FAMILY, FRIENDS TRY TO COPE WITH DEATH, the Oregonian, 12-10-1995, [http://0-infoweb.newsbank.com.catalog.multcolib.org/iw-search/we/InfoWeb?p_action=doc&p_topdoc=1&p_docnum=1&p_sort=YMD_date:D&p_product=NewsBank&p_text_direct-0=document_id=\(%200EB08936619386FC%20\)&p_docid=0EB08936619386FC&p_theme=aggdocs&p_queryname=0EB08936619386FC&f_openurl=yes&p_nbid=T66S57SVMTM1ODMxNDM5Mi42NzU5NzM6MT04OnJmLTEwNTEEx&&p_multi=ORGB](http://0-infoweb.newsbank.com.catalog.multcolib.org/iw-search/we/InfoWeb?p_action=doc&p_topdoc=1&p_docnum=1&p_sort=YMD_date:D&p_product=NewsBank&p_text_direct-0=document_id=(%200EB08936619386FC%20)&p_docid=0EB08936619386FC&p_theme=aggdocs&p_queryname=0EB08936619386FC&f_openurl=yes&p_nbid=T66S57SVMTM1ODMxNDM5Mi42NzU5NzM6MT04OnJmLTEwNTEEx&&p_multi=ORGB))

Robert James Acremant was later arrested for the murders. Initially he claimed that his killings were a result of a robbery gone awry. However, he eventually changed his story. He murdered them, he admitted, because he hated homosexuals as well as bisexual men.

Roxanne had gone to meet Acremant at his request about an apartment rental. At some point, Roxanne called Michelle to tell her that her car would not start. Michelle drove to the location where Roxanne was meeting with Acremant to give Michelle’s car a jump. That gave Acremant the opportunity to kill both of them. According to a site that documents anti-LGBT hate crimes:

Interviews and media reports confirm that Acremant knew the couple were lesbians. He had previous contact with Ellis two weeks before the murders, when he had been shown the same apartment where he met Ellis on December 4, 1995.

Acremant also acknowledged that he had asked Ellis – the victim with whom he spend the most time – if she and Abdill were lesbians and she said they were.

Interviews indicated he may have spent some of the time before Abdill's arrival asking Ellis about details of their life. In an interview with *The Oregonian* he said it made him “sick to my stomach” to learn that she was “someone's grandma.” (http://www.lgbthatecrimes.org/doku.php?id=abdill_and_ellis)

After Acremant revealed his motive in killing the lesbian couple, he later confessed that he had killed a drinking buddy because the man had made a pass at him. (MAN SAYS HE KILLED LESBIANS IN HATRED, *The Oregonian*, 8-21,1996, [http://0-infoweb.newsbank.com.catalog.multcolib.org/iw-search/we/InfoWeb?p_action=doc&p_topdoc=1&p_docnum=1&p_sort=YMD_date:D&p_product=NewsBank&p_text_direct-0=document_id=\(%200EB089B54C64C71E%20\)&p_docid=0EB089B54C64C71E&p_theme=aggdocs&p_queryname=0EB089B54C64C71E&f_openurl=yes&p_nbid=M68K59NXMTM1ODMxNTA4MS42NjkxMTE6MT04OnJmLTEwNTE&p_multi=ORGB](http://0-infoweb.newsbank.com.catalog.multcolib.org/iw-search/we/InfoWeb?p_action=doc&p_topdoc=1&p_docnum=1&p_sort=YMD_date:D&p_product=NewsBank&p_text_direct-0=document_id=(%200EB089B54C64C71E%20)&p_docid=0EB089B54C64C71E&p_theme=aggdocs&p_queryname=0EB089B54C64C71E&f_openurl=yes&p_nbid=M68K59NXMTM1ODMxNTA4MS42NjkxMTE6MT04OnJmLTEwNTE&p_multi=ORGB))

Michelle and Roxanne were courageous in being open about their sexual orientation and in working against an anti-gay agenda at a time and place where their actions put them in danger. Let's remember them as we continue to work for our full human rights and dignity.

This article may be copied in whole or in part if it is done truthfully and respectfully. In all cases, credit must be given the Gay and Lesbian Archives of the Pacific Northwest (GLAPN).