

Gay rights advocate questions sentence

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John Oren Biggs has been sentenced to seven years, four months in prison for the beating death of Nurl Renfro, but that maximum term may allow for his release in just two years.

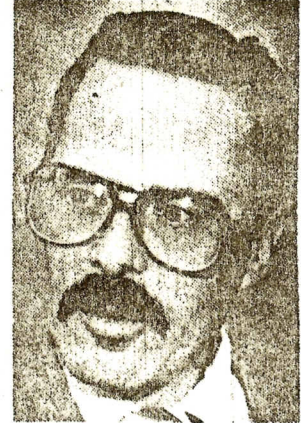
And the possibility of that relatively early release has prompted a member of an attorney general's civil rights commission to call for hearings in Bakersfield on the subject of violence against homosexuals in Kern County.

The Biggs case came to the attention of Glendale attorney Thomas Coleman, a member of the Attorney General's Commission on Racial, Ethnic, Religious and Minority Violence, because Renfro was a homosexual and because Biggs' attorney won a reduction in charges based largely on the victim's lifestyle.

Coleman had said a month ago that he had begun inquiring into the types of verdicts returned in Kern County cases involving homosexuals. He said after the Biggs sentencing that because of what he has learned, he will ask the committee at its December meeting to



John Oren Biggs



Thomas Coleman

conduct hearings in Bakersfield sometime in the spring.

Deputy District Attorney T. Daniel Sparks brought the 19-year-old Biggs to trial charged with murder in the Dec. 19, 1982, slaying of the 50-year-old businessman.

But defense attorney Joseph Giuffre presented evidence of Renfro's lifestyle, arguing that Renfro was not only a homosexual, but was a "pervert"

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 whose 1707 Elm St. home was a "house of horrors" from which Biggs had to kill to escape.

The jury apparently accepted Giuffre's contention that Biggs' attack was prompted by Renfro's homosexual advances. Jurors voted to convict Biggs of voluntary manslaughter, the crime for which he was sentenced Wednesday by Superior Court Judge Lewis E. King.

"This crime is the cruelest and most vicious homicide in Kern County history," Sparks told King in arguing for the maximum term.

Biggs "is clearly a sociopath and by this homicide he has proven himself a homicidal sociopath," Sparks said.

"For the good of the community at large, and the memory of Nurl Renfro, impose the maximum sentence the law will allow," Sparks said.

But Giuffre argued that Biggs should be sentenced to a lower term and asked that Biggs be allowed to serve that term in the California Youth Authority rather than in state prison.

The crime wasn't really Biggs' fault, Giuffre argued. He said Renfro was "Such a perverted gay that he picks on little boys, children of age 18 ..."

"This little boy," Giuffre said of his client, "This little boy just lost his cool."

King, after outlining Biggs' criminal record that dates back to when he was 11, agreed with Sparks.

"Society's protection requires the maximum commitment," the judge said of the defendant in ordering a prison term that totals seven years, four months.

But with credit for time already served and time off for good behavior, Biggs might serve only about two more years.

Coleman, also a homosexual, said the sentence in the case may not be as significant as the verdict.

He recalled "about seven to eight homicides over the past three years" involving homosexual victims and said he wonders whether Kern County juries can return strict enough verdicts against people accused of killing gays.

He said he will ask other members of his committee to schedule fact-finding hearings on the issue, probably in March, in Bakersfield.

"The gay community here is numb. It's numbed that the system is unresponsive in protecting the civil rights of gay people.

"I haven't traveled to every county, but through the networking that exists, I would say that Bakersfield and Kern County may be the bleakest area for gay people in the state," Coleman said.

BIGGS RECORD OF OFFENSES:

AGE	CHARGE
11	ASSAULT & BATTERY
12	BURGLARY
13	SHOOTING AT POLICE
15	THREAT TO KILL BR.
15	BURGLARY
15	ROBBERY, CAMP OWENS
15	ASSAULT W/WEAPON
16	EXTORTION
17	ATTACK PRISONER
17	ESCAPE, VANDELISM.
18	VOL. MANSLAUGHTER