



LOCAL
Saratoga Lake's
'cove' a favorite
for summer
relaxation. B1



SPORTS
Princess
wins Alabama
Stakes for
Eddie. C1



LIFE
Chorus commits to intense schedule. E1

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SCHENECTADY, NY ♦ TWO DOLLARS

AUGUST 18, 2013

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PAGE B6



AMSTERDAM

Looking for answers

Killers' statements offer new
details about teens' murders

BY JOHN ENGER
Gazette Reporter

July 2012 was hot.
It touched nearly 100 degrees at one point — heat
stroke weather. That heat withered crops, browned
lawns and interrupted the plans of two
Amsterdam teenagers.

On July 9, Matt Phelps and Anthony
Brasmeister lined up and shot their two
friends, Paul Damphier and Jonathan
DeJesus, in the forehead. They did it in a
soybean field behind Phelps' house on
Snooks Corners Road south of Amster-
dam — a field of clay soil baked hard in
the heat wave.

"There was a small hole near where
we found the bodies," said Montgomery
County District Attorney James "Jed"
Conboy. "It looks like they planned to
bury the bodies, but that was a hot week. The ground
was all clay and hard as rock. They gave up."

Brasmeister, 16 and Phelps, then 15, confessed to killing
their friends and were sentenced to 25 years to life and 15
years to life, respectively. Damphier was 16 and DeJe-
sus just 13. Few details were released during the year
of court proceedings, but with the boys in prison, new



Top: Anthony Brasmeister
and Matt Phelps sit with
their lawyers before
sentencing in Montgomery
County Court last month.

Above: This family photo
shows Jonathan DeJesus
with his sisters, Autumn,
Vivian and Amanda, and
mother, Bridget Masesie.
Masesie, who provided the
photo, said it was shot on the
family's last Thanksgiving
together, in 2011.



Left: This photo of Paul
Damphier, left, hanging out
with his friend Anthony
Brasmeister was provided to
the Gazette by one of their
school friends. Brasmeister
and Matt Phelps were later
convicted of the shooting
deaths of Damphier and
Jonathan DeJesus.

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SCHENECTADY

Death penalty group evolves

Rev. Ackerman takes
over from Kaczynski

BY SARA FOSS
Gazette Reporter

The Rev. Valerie Ackerman has advocated for
homeless children and domestic-violence victims.
She volunteers as a mediator, has served parishion-
ers from the pulpit and is active in her neighbor-
hood association.

Now, Ackerman, 56, will bring her diverse ex-
perience to New Yorkers for Alternatives to the
Death Penalty, a statewide organization headquar-
tered at the Roman Catholic Diocese of Albany. A
resident of Schenectady, she was recently named
executive director of the group, succeeding former
Schenectady resident David Kaczynski.

Ackerman said the group's goals dovetail nicely
with her own.

"I've been advocating for non-violence for pretty
much my whole life," she said during an interview
in her office. "This is a perfect match for me."

After the New York Court of Appeals declared
the state's death penalty unconstitutional in 2004,
effectively banning it, New Yorkers for Alternatives
to the Death Penalty shifted focus. The emphasis
became violence prevention, healing for victims and
rehabilitation, rather than the abolition of capital

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Poll: Parents in favor of testing

**BY PHILIP ELLIOTT
AND JENNIFER AGIESTA**
The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Often criticized as too pre-
scriptive and all-consuming, standardized tests
have support among parents, who view them as a
useful way to measure both students' and schools'
performances, according to an Associated Press-
NORC Center for Public Affairs Research poll.

Most parents also say their own children are
given about the right number of standardized tests,
according to the poll.

They'd like to see student performance on state-
wide exams used in evaluating teachers, and almost

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Killings

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information was made available to The Gazette.

Both killers had to file an account of what happened and why, for parole purposes. Those accounts could not be released in their entirety, but Conboy summarized them.

"The two of them were talking weeks before the murders," he said. "Brasmeister mentioned Damphier had robbed him. That's when they decided he needed to be dealt with."

Conboy said Phelps and Brasmeister plotted the killing over many days, developing a story to lure Damphier into the field. Brasmeister's account claims he told Damphier to come help him rob a stash of marijuana kept in a neighbor's shed.

The night of the supposed raid, DeJesus just happened to be tagging along, an inconvenient witness.

"It's Brasmeister's story, so take it with a grain of salt," Conboy said, "but neither one seemed to be trying to make themselves look better. In fact, they didn't seem to show any remorse at all."

TRUTH AND RUMOR

Damphier and DeJesus were missing for nearly two weeks before their bodies were found. In those days, DeJesus's mother,

Bridget Masesie, hit the streets in her minivan.

She became a detective. She talked to countless teenagers and heard as many rumors.

"I didn't meet one that didn't lie to me," she said. "One kid told me my son was skateboarding at the end of the street when he'd been dead for three days."

The accounts of Phelps and Brasmeister, she said, are no different. "Of course they're going to lie," she said. "They're teenagers in prison. They're looking for an excuse."

She described an average day from before the murder. Damphier was her son's best friend and her daughter's boyfriend. He was always around.

"Jonathan just loved him," she said. "He would follow him anywhere."

Damphier was a popular kid — a kid without enemies. Masesie had a son just three months before the murder, and said even the baby liked Damphier.

By contrast, Brasmeister seemed to lack friends. Sandre Damphier, Paul's mother, said Brasmeister was an occasional visitor to her home, but was usually pretty quiet.

"Pauly was good looking and funny. He was good at basketball. Women just flocked to him," she said. "I think Brasmeister was jealous. That's the only thing that makes sense to me."

Masesie formed similar conclusions from her detective work, calling Phelps a psychopath looking for



GAZETTE FILE PHOTO

Anthony Brasmeister, 17, is led into Montgomery County Court in April.

someone to kill and Brasmeister a jealous and unpopular kid, willing to lead a trusted friend to his death for notoriety.

"Everyone knew Pauly," she said, "but Brasmeister — no one heard of him until he murdered two people. You don't kill someone over some weed."

Conboy said Phelps brought at least one friend out to see the bodies. That boy was so disturbed he eventually told an adult. Even

before he did, though, snippets of information began spreading long before law enforcement reached the field.

Amsterdam High School senior Harrison Flint was in summer school at the time, and said kids were full of conjecture and speculation.

"They were pretty freaked out," he said. "Those guys were friends."

Many said Damphier stole

Brasmeister's marijuana and the murders were revenge. Some said there was a small band of white supremacists, including Phelps and Brasmeister, and Damphier and DeJesus were shot for their black and Hispanic lineage.

"Some people said Phelps cut up the bodies and scattered them all over the field," Flint said. "Imagine thinking that."

Most of the rumors spread around remain just that.

But there's some truth to the most disturbing rumor: Conboy said that when Phelps and Brasmeister couldn't dig a hole to bury the bodies they tried to dismember them.

"But it's hard to dismember a human body," he said, "and eventually they gave up on that as well."

They left the two bodies in the field after severing only DeJesus' hands.

TWO SHOOTERS

The two killers confessed under what Conboy described as "significant proof." At the time of the arrests, police said Phelps was the triggerman, shooting both boys in their torsos multiple times. Since then, more accurate details have come to light.

At the scene two weeks after the murders, investigators found 11 .22 caliber shell casings. Ten were brass colored, of the same type as live rounds found near a Savage brand rifle with a 10-round clip in the Phelps' residence.

One shell was silver.

Following his arrest, Brasmeister called his father, Tim, at his Bel-fance Road residence on a recorded line.

"We have him asking his father if he had disposed of what he described as, 'that thing I use when I'm out in the woods with the dog looking for woodchucks,'" Conboy said. "That line is obviously recorded. There's a sign. We're not dealing with professionals here."

Police mobilized to the Brasmeister home immediately. Conboy said Tim Brasmeister met the officers at the door, saying, "I screwed the door shut the day he got arrested."

A single-shot Rossi .22 caliber rifle was found in the bedroom.

Ballistics experts couldn't conclusively say the shells were from the recovered guns, but did rule the brass shells were not used in the single shot, and the silver shell was not used in the Savage.

"So at that point," Conboy said, "we have two shooters."

Under that proof, he said they won't likely make parole.

The sentencing wasn't much consolation to the grieving mothers, but Masesie has one detail to cling to.

"At least Damphier and my son left this world next to someone they loved," she said. "I don't think their killers will experience that."

Reach Gazette reporter
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Director

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punishment.

"Just eliminating the death penalty isn't a solution to any real problem," Ackerman said. "We want to figure out how people can avoid getting involved with the criminal justice system."

The group, previously known as New Yorkers Against the Death Penalty, changed its name to better reflect its more holistic, community-oriented agenda. And as it continues to evolve, Ackerman said another name change might be necessary.

"We're working on how to frame our paradigm shift in a way that is accessible," she said.

Albany Diocese Bishop Howard Hubbard said New Yorkers for Alternatives to the Death Penalty is "at a critical juncture." The group must remain "vigilant to ensure that the death penalty does not come back," but must also address the root causes of violence. He said one of the group's challenges is communicating its vision, which is less defined and broader in scope than the more single-minded focus on ending the death penalty.

"Now that the death penalty has become a moot point, we want to address wider societal issues: bullying, domestic violence, people with emotional problems," said Hubbard, who serves as chairman of the group's board of directors.

Hubbard said Ackerman is a good fit for the organization because "she has a real commitment to social justice. She shares our vision about the death penalty being something that's uneeded and really immoral in today's society."

He noted that Ackerman lacks the celebrity of Kaczynski, whose story is well known: As the brother of domestic terrorist Ted Kaczynski, he assisted the FBI in its search for his brother, then fought to save his brother's life when prosecutors mounted a death penalty case. Ted Kaczynski ultimately pleaded guilty and remains incarcerated.

"It's not an easy task following David Kaczynski," Hubbard said, "but I think her open and collegial demeanor will serve her well."

Kaczynski retired last year and moved to the small Ulster County town of Woodstock with his wife, longtime Union College philoso-



MARC SCHULTZ/GAZETTE PHOTOGRAPHER

The Rev. Valerie Ackerman, new executive director of New Yorkers for Alternatives to the Death Penalty, helps out at a recent Schenectady Inner City Ministry lunch program at Quackenbush Park.

to the Death Penalty would like to expand it to school systems throughout the state.

"We want to take Limits of Loyalty on the road," Ackerman said.

◆ The group is also involved with Project Safe Neighborhoods, a national program that helps parolees transition to life outside prison by having them meet with a panel that includes other ex-convicts and law-enforcement officials. The idea is to welcome them home and let them know that they have choices and options, Ackerman said.

Project Safe Neighborhoods is "really powerful," Ackerman said. "The parolees are welcomed back to the community, which no criminal ever expects. They expect to be treated like pariahs."

Ackerman moved to Schenectady about five years ago from Tulsa, Okla., and is now active in a variety of civic and social change organizations.

In Tulsa, Ackerman founded Peace House, where she served as chaplain and worked with people suffering from domestic violence. Not long after moving to Schenectady, she was hired by the YWCA of NorthEastern NY, where she served as coordinator for the

there are three types of ministers — parish, education and community — and she considers herself a community minister. That means she is "out in the world doing things," rather than serving a congregation or teaching.

"I have been in the pulpit, but I think my gifts are best used in the community," Ackerman said. "Most Unitarian Universalists are, in one way or another, trying to change society."

Ackerman grew up outside Pittsburgh and has also lived in Michigan and Illinois. She and her husband, Bill, moved to Schenectady when he was hired by General Electric. They live in the Stockade neighborhood, and Ackerman has become active in the Stockade Association, serving on its board of directors.

"I really love living in downtown Schenectady," Ackerman said.

Ackerman said one of her big challenges as executive director of New Yorkers for Alternatives to the Death Penalty will be convincing people that violence prevention and rehabilitation are possible.

"It's hard to convince people that there's a way to prevent problems,"

Poll

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three-quarters said they favored changes that would make it easier for schools to fire poorly performing teachers.

"The tests are good because they show us where students are at, if they need help with anything," said Vicky Nevarez, whose son Jesse just graduated from high school in Murrieta, Calif. "His teachers were great, and if there were problems, the tests let me know."

The polling results are good news for states looking to implement increased accountability standards and for those who want to hold teachers responsible for students' slipping standing against other countries' scores. Teachers' unions have objected to linking educators' evaluations to student performance.

As students prepare to return to classrooms, the AP-NORC Center surveyed parents of students at all grade levels and found:

◆ Sixty-one percent of parents think their children take an appropriate number of standardized tests, while 26 percent think their children take too many tests.

◆ Teachers' fates shouldn't rest solely on test results, according to a majority of parents. Fifty-six percent said classroom observations should be part of teachers' evaluations, and 74 percent of all parents said they wanted districts to help struggling teachers.

◆ Despite many Republicans' unrelenting criticism of the Common Core State Standards, in various stages of implementation in 45 states and the District of Columbia, 52 percent of parents have heard little or nothing about the academic benchmarks and a third are unsure if they live in a state using them. Still, when given a brief description of what the standards do, about half of parents say educational quality will improve once the standards are implemented, 11 percent think it will get worse and 27 percent say they'll have no effect.

◆ Seventy-five percent of parents say standardized tests are a solid measure of their children's abilities, and 69 percent say such exams are a good measure of the schools' quality.

CONTROVERSIAL LINK

eight grade at a charter school this fall. The weights-and-measures inspector supports the testing because "it shows what they know, and what they should know."

"We need some way to keep track of whether the teachers are spending enough time educating," Land said.

Education union leaders have stood opposed to linking teacher evaluations with these tests, arguing it is unfair to punish teachers for students' shortcomings. They also say teachers have not had sufficient time to rewrite their lessons to reflect new academic benchmarks, such as those found in the Common Core.

When states have adopted the Common Core State Standards, which aim to provide consistent requirements across all states for math and English, test results often falter and the standards can make schools and teachers appear to be faring worse than they did the previous year.

Then, what to do with those test results?

A full 93 percent of parents say standardized tests should be used to identify areas where students need extra help. Smaller majorities think such tests should be used to measure school quality, evaluate teachers or determine whether students are promoted or graduate.

At the same time, 72 percent of all parents said they want to make it easier for school districts to fire teachers who aren't getting the job done. That position had the strongest showing among white parents, 80 percent of whom favored the idea. About 6 in 10 Hispanic or black parents agreed.

That's not to say, though, that parents want to dismiss teachers immediately or leave them without a safety net, especially not new educators. Eighty-seven percent of all parents said they wanted districts to spend money to help new teachers.

For Julie Dorwart, a behavior therapist from Wilmington, N.C., making sure students do well with the material that's taught is important. Her son Matt, who is starting his freshman year of high school this fall, "really stressed out" about standardized tests but nonetheless performed well. She would prefer

school officials evaluate students and teachers based on grades, not just universal tests.

"The schools make such a big deal about them and put so much emphasis on (the tests) that the kids freak out," she said.

A MATTER OF PERSPECTIVE

Among parents who are also teachers or share a household with a teacher, the opinions shifted. Only about 3 in 10 in that group think changes in students' test scores should count in teacher evaluations. Finally, 56 percent of parents who are teachers oppose using standardized test scores to evaluate teacher quality compared with only 36 percent of other parents.

"I think the biggest crime is that teaching has turned to focus on the tests, rather than the tests being a tool that help you understand. All the teaching and learning is on the subject being tested," said Abby Cohen, a 50-year-old teacher from Newton, Mass., a Boston suburb.

Her daughter, Isabel Snyder, is starting her senior year, and Cohen worries Isabel didn't get as much as she could have from the teachers because of the focus on testing.

"You have to ask how much you're straightjacketing the teachers," Cohen said.

The survey was sponsored by the Joyce Foundation, which works to promote policies that improve the quality of teachers, including the development of new teacher evaluation systems, enhance early reading reforms and encourage innovation in public schools.

The AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research survey was conducted June 21 through July 22, 2013. The nationally representative poll, conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago, involved landline and cellphone interviews in English or Spanish with 1,025 parents of children who completed grades K-12 in the last school year. Results for the full sample have a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 4.1 percentage points; it is larger for subgroups.

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