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Home > News > Local & National

McIlveen's family finally see his killers convicted

Thursday, 26 February 2009

The family of murdered Ballymena teenager Michael McIlveen last night said they believed that justice has been done at last.

Three Ballymena men were yesterday found guilty of the sectarian murder of the Catholic schoolboy almost three years ago.

The 15-year-old died in hospital on May 8, 2006, from head injuries the day after he was attacked and beaten with a baseball bat by a group of Protestant youths who had chased him and a friend in Ballymena.

The killing shocked the Co Antrim town, where sectarian tensions had been simmering.

Speaking outside the court yesterday, Michael's sister Jodie said: "We now feel that justice has been done. Michael will be always in our thoughts and we loved him dearly in our minds, first thing in the morning and last thing at night."

Meanwhile PSNI Detective Superintendent Raymond Murray, who led the investigation into Michael's murder, said: "From beginning to end this is a tragic case and it speaks for itself about where these street conflicts can go."

Guilty of a brutal killing, but already they plan to appeal

Four young Ballymena men convicted of the savage and brutal sectarian killing of schoolboy Michael McIlveen are already planning to appeal the guilty verdicts against them, it emerged last night.

Three of the accused have already been jailed for life for the murder of the 15-year-old Catholic schoolboy, while sentence on the fourth accused, convicted of manslaughter, has been adjourned until April.

Those convicted of the murder, 19-year-old Jeff Colin Lewis, of Rossdale, 22-year-old Christopher Francis Kerr, of Carnduff Drive, and Aaron Cavana Wallace (20), of Moat Road, will learn in April the minimum term they must serve before they are considered for release.

To be jailed along with them for the murder is 20-year-old Meryvn Wilson Moon, from Douglas Terrace, also Ballymena, who had earlier pleaded guilty.

Facing jail for the manslaughter is 18-year-old Christopher Andrew McLeister, of Knockeen Crescent. A sixth accused, 18-year-old Paul Edward David Henson of Condiere Avenue, could also be jailed for affray and criminal damage.

After the marathon 52 day trial, spread over four months, it took the Antrim Crown Court jury of eight women and three men just over seven hours to convict of the brutal murder.

In turn they rejected defence claims that while they had chased Michael McIlveen, they took no part in his killing.

The teenager died in hospital on May 8, 2006, from head injuries the day after he was bludgeoned with a baseball bat and beaten by the Protestant youths who had chased him and a friend.

This is the second jury to be told that Michael McIlveen's only crime "was being a Catholic, no



Fighting back tears: Michael McIlveen's sister Jodie and mother Gina after the verdicts were announced yesterday

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other reason". The teenager and his friend were chased after going looking for a Protestant friend among a crowd of drunken sectarian teenagers.

They chased Michael McIlveen to an alleyway where he had gone looking for safety.

One of the gang, who had already pleaded guilty to the murder, "nailed" him with a baseball bat, swinging it overhead, and also as if he were taking a golf swing.

The others, surrounding the defenceless teenager, "put the boot in", and the hail of blows fractured his skull on both sides, which formed a blood clot and multiple bruising of the brain.

Unaware of his fatal injuries Michael, with the help of friends, stumbled home, and went to bed. His uncle Sean, thinking that he was drunk, took a mobilephone snapshot to embarrass him the following morning.

However, after a call alerting the family that Michael had been the victim of a "a brutal and savage attack" they called an ambulance, but despite all efforts, he died the following day.

The jury, by direction of the court, had already acquitted another of the accused, 18-year-old Peter Gavin McMullan of Meadowvale, after he had pleaded guilty to causing criminal damage to a gate of a house in Granville Drive, backing onto the alleyway in which Michael was attacked.

Their original trial, which began last September, ran for six weeks before it was aborted amid a confusion of legal argument after the jury had allegedly heard prejudicial evidence concerning one of the accused.

### Verdict welcomed on the streets of Ballymena

The conclusion of the Michael McIlveen murder trial brings to an end a three-year nightmare for the people of Ballymena.

The murder convictions of four men and the conviction of one man for manslaughter were welcomed in the town last night — but many feared there would be no end to the suffering of Michael's family, as they face the rest of their lives without their son and brother.

Resident Simone Black said she was glad at the trial's outcome but will always have vivid memories of the aftermath of the schoolboy's brutal murder.

She said: "It was a terrible thing to happen. His family live near me and our whole estate came out to remember him in a vigil. There was a big memorial to him. My cousin was friends with Michael as well, and was with him the night it happened. But he managed to get away."

Gillian McAuley said the three men found guilty of murder yesterday — Aaron Cavana Wallace, (20) of Moat Road; Christopher Francis Kerr, (22) of Carnduff Drive and Jeff Colin Lewis (19), Rosssdale, — and Mervyn Wilson Moon (20) of Douglas Terrace in the town, who pleaded guilty at the start of the trial — deserved long prison sentences.

"Michael McIlveen was just a young fella who wasn't doing anybody any harm. For somebody to come along, beat him up and eventually kill him is just awful."

The progress of the trial had been followed closely by Stephen Campbell. He said: "I think justice has probably been done today, and I think this is as good as a result as you could get for the case. It was a long time ago now but I don't think this will put an end to the bad feeling about what happened him — that will run on."

Elizabeth Gordon was another passer-by who felt the loss of Michael, particularly on behalf of his mother Gina.

"I am really glad that people are being made to pay. Even the thought of what they did to Michael makes me sick."

### Now we can try and rebuild our lives, say family

The family of Michael McIlveen, who have sat through weeks of graphic and gruelling evidence, yesterday said they were happy that justice had been done.

Speaking outside the court, Michael's sister Jodie — flanked by mother Gina — said that her family also sympathised with the families of the young men who had been convicted of Michael's murder.

"On behalf of the whole family we welcome these verdicts, we now feel that justice has been done," she said.

"It is impossible to describe what we have been through in the last three years, it has been hard to cope.

"Michael will be always in our thoughts and we loved him dearly in our minds, first thing in the morning and last thing at night.

"We now want to take this time to thank the witnesses who came forward and told their stories — police, prosecutors and friends and family. The McIlveen family sympathises with the families of the accused. The trial is now over and we can try and rebuild our lives."

Jodie added later that sitting through the trial was "an absolute tragedy".

She said: "Michael was a brilliant wee fella who was looking forward to his life and wanted to get into different things like sport".

PSNI Detective Superintendent Raymond Murray, who led the investigation into Michael's murder, said police were also pleased at the outcome of the trial.

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"It was a big result in a very high profile murder case," he said.

"The main thing for us is that the family have come out of this feeling that justice has been done for Michael McIlveen, who at the end of the day was a 15-year-old child who was murdered and unfortunately murdered by some of the defendants, themselves children.

"From beginning to end this is a tragic case and it speaks for itself about where these street conflicts can go. I would urge anybody who feels on the edge and getting involved in anything like this at all, to think about this today and think about the tragedy of the McIlveen family and think about the tragedy of young men who are now facing long periods of imprisonment.

"It has been a very difficult case and there are few words I can think of to adequately describe the strength of the McIlveen family through this entire process, of having to deal with the death of Michael itself, the intervening period as the case made its way through the courts, and now almost five months of the period of the trial. They are a very, very strong family and I can't praise them enough.

"We worked very closely with them and I think it is fair to say that perhaps at an earlier stage, lesser charges were open to us. But we were very strong and resilient with the family, that we were going to press this to the end, because we believed that the defendants, in the main, apart from one, should face murder charges and I feel this has been vindicated today.

"To me it does not really matter whether skirmishes are organised over the internet, mobile phones or whether they developed spontaneously. This is where it can end, with one 15-year-old badly beaten in an alleyway who subsequently dies from his injuries and several people are now looking at long terms of imprisonment.

"It is just vital that everybody, the community, the police, parents, teenagers themselves sit back and think about these sort of activities and realise quite simply they are a road to nowhere.

Praising his police team and the work of prosecutors John Orr QC and Neil Connor, the superintendent described the case as "a tragedy and we feel to a limited extent, the tragedy of the family ... and it is quite clear, the absolute toll it has taken on them.

"And today as this aspect of the criminal justice system may close, their struggle to rebuild their lives does not."

#### Appalling crime that sent shock waves into the corridors of power

Even in a place as grimly inured to violence as Northern Ireland, the death of Michael McIlveen brought a wave of shock and revulsion.

Tributes to the 15-year-old were paid at the time by Tony Blair in the House of Commons and by former Taoiseach Bertie Ahern.

A book of condolence was opened at the local council headquarters and numerous tributes were paid on internet message boards.

But for many the death of the popular schoolboy also brought about the fear that the country's teenagers, while too young to remember the worst of the Troubles and sectarian hatred, were nonetheless victims of this dark episode in the province's past.

At Michael's funeral, mourners were told by the Bishop of Down and Connor, the Most Reverend Patrick Walsh, how Michael had joined the "long, sad litany of those murdered by sectarian hatred".

In the weeks and months which followed his death tensions in Ballymena were at a marked high.

There were further incidents of attacks on young people in the town and police were forced to keep rival gangs apart at a Christmas lights switch-on.

A makeshift shrine to Michael was also paint bombed, while a video featuring offensive remarks about his death was reported to be circulating on mobile phones.

Michael had been on an evening out when he was chased and beaten in an alleyway in Ballymena in May 2006.

The teenager died in hospital from head injuries a day after the attack.

For his family, his death was followed by a very painful process to try and bring those responsible to justice.

That those arrested in the days following his death were themselves young people only served to deepen the shock which permeated Ballymena and Northern Ireland as a whole.

After a wait of more than two years the trial began in the autumn of 2008.

For seven weeks, Michael's family heard graphic details of his final hours, of the attempts to revive him and the injuries which led to his death.

There was a dramatic twist during the trial when one of the accused, 20-year-old Mervyn Wilson Moon, pleaded guilty to his involvement in the murder.

But the family's anguish was to continue when the trial was halted in October, after hearing evidence from more than 40 witnesses.

At the time the judge told the court that it was "as a result of certain matters which have arisen".

The second trial began a few weeks later — and once again the family had to sit through

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