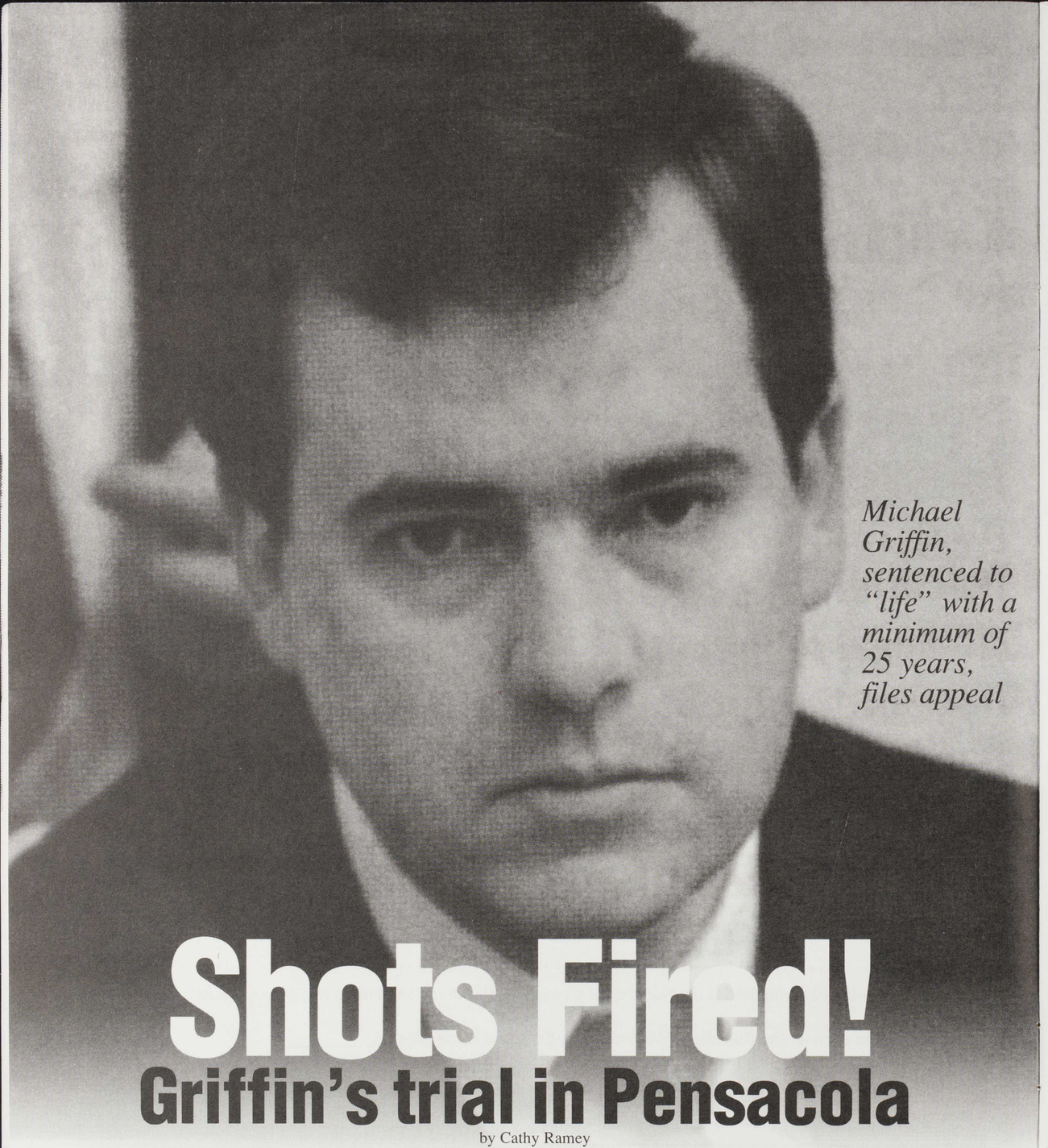


Michael Griffin, sentenced to "life" with a minimum of 25 years, files appeal

Shots Fired!

Griffin's trial in Pensacola

by Cathy Ramey

First there is the town; suddenly transformed into a military zone; SWAT teams are stationed with telescopes and rifles atop taller buildings around the courthouse and at the top of the modern-day fortress that houses Michael Griffin's judge and jury. If it were possible to see them with the same strength telescopes they are using to scrutinize passers-by, the radio gear and sophisticared long-range walkie talkies that must be close at hand would be apparent. Almost miraculously others of their sort appear on the ground when people of the pro-life persuasion are walking by. Ostensibly, they have been ordered forward by those scanning the sidewalks from on high. Throughout the first week of proceedings there are complaints from one or another of the anti-abortion faction. One man is arrested on a trespass warrant from hundreds of miles away.

The courthouse, set on two acres of ground, is surrounded by metal barricades. Police in regular sky blue uniform shirts guard the entrances where barriers have been placed in funnel fashion leading in toward the doors to the building. Most are allowed to enter with hardly a glance, but a few, those suspected of having an adverse opinion of abortion, are scrutinized with suspicion. By day two it has become common-place for those who are observed with the Rev. Paul Hill to be ordered to produce identification. Photos are taken along with an address.

Each day, as the jury selection process continues, is heavy with tension. Police and protesters are engaged in a silent war where armed officers attempt to bully activists — those willing to carry a sign — away from the courthouse. A scant number are willing to brave the harrassment; even an unspoken threat of arrest in order to suggest that Griffin might be justified in shooting an abortionist to save his victims, or that abortion ought to be tried at least as vigorously as Michael Griffin. Every day it seems there is at least one episode that pits police against a pro-lifer.

Moving in to the courthouse, there are security precautions yet to be observed. A metal detector screeches for one and is silent for another as spectators walk through with hesitation. Men in uniform with guns and walkie-talkies fastened to their hips can be seen in first one corner and then another.

Armed with nothing more than a purse, or perhaps a camera, pen and paper, observers of the trial huddle around the doors of elevators. They speak in hushed tones, uncomfortable, wondering what imaginary line they might cross that would bring the full force of "security" down upon them. Tension inside is as tangible as outside where long range scopes follow your every move, but the jury is being selected, it is important to be here.

Jury selection is observed on a 30 inch color television screen. All of the actors are hidden from view behind closed doors. Apparently there is some concern that jurors may feel awkward and inhibited by being asked questions in open court. Like the abortion "right to privacy" which has spawned this trial, their personal privacy supercedes the normal system of justice. Each of them are assigned a number lest their name be attached to an unpopular view. In this setting of diminished accountability sixty-nine men and women are interviewed.

The camera which is taping interviews is carefully turned so that at no time are we allowed to see who is being interrogated. A voice proceeding from one end of a long conference room table is all that identifies the person.

Remarkably, most of those in the jury pool have read little about the case to be tried. Those who have assure the court that they are able to listen to the evidence presented in an unbiased fashion. One of them is asked about her perception of Michael Griffin's attempt to be his own lawyer and later to try to plead an insanity defense.

"How do you feel about him trying to do that," Eddins asks, referring to his effort to forego using a bar-licensed attorney.

"That would be ridiculous!" she answers with finality. Further, she claims that "Too many people get off on an insanity defense." However, these issues wouldn't affect her judgment. "Everyone has the right to help himself," she explains.

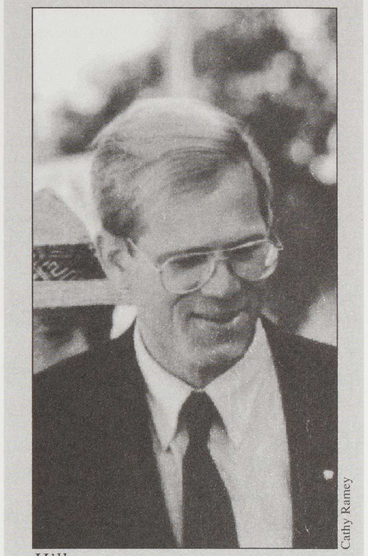
Anothor one, juror #171, has worked with two physicians listed as possible prosecution witnesses. She has also worked with the wife of Sgt. Hollingsworth who is scheduled to testify against Michael Griffin. Her warm relationship with these people, she says, would not cause her to give their testimony more weight than that of any other witness. The remainder of the jury selection process proceeds in similar fashion.

Michael Griffin is sitting, last seat, tucked into a back corner of the room. He listens attentively, calm, but there are dark lines underneath his eyes. The poor color quality on the television screen gives his skin a green cast. The man to his left has pulled his chair forward and turned away so that his right shoulder and back are facing Griffin. It serves to increase the sense that he is isolated, alone and almost ignored in the midst of a room full of people.

Throughout the trial, his own attorneys will heighten this impression. At no time do they ever come in physical contact with him. They do not appear to offer encouragement; are generally not seen conferring with him about his defense; and rarely ever look in his direction. Even when he breaks down sobbing toward the end of the thirteen day trial ordeal his counsel is cool and reserved toward him. They have been quoted in the media, expressing frustration that their client is "unable to cooperate in his own defense."

Potential jurors, one by one, are asked by Griffin's attorney, Bill Eddins about their knowledge of cults and brainwashing. One juror, asked if he believed it was possible for a person to "snap" or experience a sudden mental break, replied, "Most of those people work at the post office." It is the only light moment throughout seven days of jury selection.

Prosecutor James Murray follows the same line of questioning as on previous days, focusing on the juror's view of the Bible and whether or not they felt a conflict between those views and Florida law. All jurors state that they have no "Christian beliefs" or "personal philosophies" which conflict with laws in the United States or the state of Florida. It is an unspoken agreement between "officers of the court" and jurors that moral squeemishness over abortion will have no place in this trial. More precisely, they all could have stated that they have "no Christian beliefs," end of quote.



Cathy Ramey

Hill

"Justifiable homicide"

Pensacola, FL — While most anti-abortion groups have sought to distance themselves from the controversy over the killing of abortionist David Gunn, ordained Presbyterian minister Paul Hill has declared that the shooting was a "justifiable homicide." In a "Defensive Action" statement, Hill and approximately thirty other pastors and leaders in the anti-abortion movement have called for the acquittal of Michael Griffin, accused of killing Gunn on March 10, 1993.

Despite the presence of Pensacola police and a large number of Escambia County Tactical Unit (SWAT team) officers, Hill and others protested throughout jury selection. Signs ranged from "Abortion kills babies" to "Gunn Control," intended according to Hill to convey the idea that "justice was served" as a result of the shooting death of the abortionist.

Following the verdict and sentencing, several signers of the "Defensive Action" statement spoke with media in support of the justifiable-homicide theory. On Wednesday, March 9, Donna Bray of the group Defenders of the Defenders of Life joined Hill in an informational leafletting at a "Positive Life Rally" sponsored by Pensacola area churches.