

Not homeless, but victim was far from home

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Norris Gaynor had parents. I suppose that was something I knew intellectually.

Still, it was startling to see Sam and Georgia Gaynor at the trial of their son's killer. Before meeting them Wednesday, I had been able to reduce Gaynor to a kind of one-dimensional character.

In my mind, he had been just another homeless fellow, one of the leathery-faced vagrants who haunt downtown Fort Lauderdale -- someone I must have seen before he was pummeled to death.

I see those guys all the time along the Riverwalk. Weary gaits. Unkempt clothes. Liquid eyes. But I couldn't pick any of them from a line-up. They are just so many anonymous homeless guys.

It was a convenient notion, until his father corrected me Wednesday. ``We always said he wasn't homeless. He was just away from home."

SOCIETY COMPLICIT

Three such men, away from home, were terribly beaten on a brutal January night in 2006. Before the trial, Gaynor's lone distinction, in my mind, had been that he was the homeless guy who died. That thinking made me kind of an accomplice, an unindicted co-conspirator in his murder. Norris Gaynor's killers, however drunk and stoned, went wilding that night, wielding baseball bats and golf clubs and a rake handle, on the assumption that nobody really would care if they battered a few bums.

They figured they had society's tacit permission to torment its castaways.

They still do. The lawyers for Brian Hooks, 21, and Thomas Daugherty, 19, are employing the disconcerting defense strategy that, hey, this was all conceived as fun.

It wasn't about greed or revenge or a sudden flare-up of anger or any of the usual motivations that lead to criminal acts. These assaults were conceived as mere antidotes against boredom. Jeremy Kroll, Hooks' lawyer, said his client only intended to "mess with some homeless men." Not kill anyone.

Video from a security camera portrayed a vicious attack that doesn't quite fit that argument. Nor did the testimony from the emergency room physician, who described treating Gaynor for ghastly head trauma. Testimony from the two surviving victims, still hurting from the attacks, added more vivid contradictions.

Sam Gaynor, tall, dignified and gentle-spoken, even as he spoke of something as reprehensible as his son's murder, sat in the front row with his wife Georgia, who wore a church dress much too elegant for those environs. Their daughter, Simone Manning-Moon, joined them. The family in the courtroom ruined any notion that these street folks are forgotten, unloved and unmourned.

The parents endured the dispassionate descriptions of their son's injuries, the splattered blood, the search for his DNA. But if they had traveled 634 miles from Milton, their rural hometown town in the Florida Panhandle, to discover the underlying motivations for their son's murder, I'm not sure the trial has offered illumination.

IRONY OF ATTACKS

It has unfolded as an utterly inexplicable night of random, savage violence by teenagers lubricated with alcohol and drugs, bent on attacking older men whose own problems with alcohol and drugs left them vulnerable and homeless. I doubt the young men ever grasped the irony.

But by being there, Sam and Georgia Gaynor reminded everyone in the courtroom that the murder victim was not some unwanted, homeless nobody. He was just away from home.