

A MOTHER STILL ASKS WHY HER DAUGHTER DIED

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Justice tranquilized her anger and numbed her pain.

But the recent trial and convictions of two men who killed her daughter didn't answer many of Eleanor Mitchell's questions or make sense of the brutal October stabbing.

"I'm still confused," Mitchell, 46, said after the trial ended earlier this month. "I don't know what ever happened to her shoes. And why did they choose Debbie? I'm just left with an empty feeling, knowing that I'll never really know what happened that night."

Deborah Haynes, 29, a drug addict and prostitute who had tried repeatedly to turn her life around, was found stabbed and slashed to death near the rest rooms at Balduck Park the morning of Oct. 29. The killers had shredded her clothes.

Patrick Musall, 17, and **Mark Barrera**, 21, were convicted of first-degree murder. They will spend the rest of their lives in prison without parole.

The killers could face another sentence, because they had oral sex with Haynes, who had the AIDS virus. None of the four defendants in the case has tested positive for the disease.

Defendant Fred Johnson, 21, was acquitted earlier this month. Matthew Copeland, 20, is scheduled to stand trial May 5.

The four were loosely associated with the East Side Vandals gang, and were known to some as skinheads: rebellious youths who espouse a racist philosophy. All are white; Haynes was black. The four were arrested after they were overheard bragging about a killing and comparing it to the Jack the Ripper stabbings in Victorian London.

Mitchell, who also has AIDS, traveled from her home in Queens, N.Y., to Detroit for the trial, hoping her presence in the Recorder's Court courtroom would force out the truth.

She had even imagined that guilt and sympathy would compel the suspects' families to tell her what happened.

"She could have been a daughter to anyone in that courtroom," Mitchell said. "I wanted them to see that Debbie's mother wasn't a bum and that Debbie was more than a drug addict, more than a prostitute. She didn't deserve to die that way."

But Mitchell didn't learn more about the killing than she already knew; instead, she was overwhelmed by people's disgust with AIDS.

"One witness called me an AIDS-ridden bitch," Mitchell said. "There was a lot of hatred. And that more than anything makes me feel like crusading."

Mitchell said two maids refused to clean her room at the hotel where she stayed during the trial, and she found garbage strewn outside her door one afternoon.

"It was the AIDS that repulsed people," Mitchell said. "A lot of people remembered that article." (Mitchell's relationship with her daughter and their fight to overcome AIDS were told in a Jan. 26 story in *The Way We Live*.)

After the article ran, Mitchell said, she received letters from talk-show host Oprah Winfrey and producers of Phil Donahue's talk show. She said she plans to speak out about her ordeal every chance she gets.

The battle with AIDS pales in comparison to the death of her daughter, Mitchell said. But she has been able to gain strength from Debbie's tragedy and that, she said, has enhanced her ability to cope with her disease.

"I've learned that I am a fighter. I fought for Debbie; I fought for justice," she said. "Now I can begin fighting for those with AIDS."

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