

News

Johns Hopkins killer gets 35 years

Defendant's attorney says students shared 'some sexual contact'

by Viet Dinh

Robert Harwood Jr., the Johns Hopkins student accused last April of shooting his classmate and former friend, Rex Chao, has pleaded guilty to second-degree murder and a handgun violation. He was sentenced to 35 years in prison.

Baltimore Circuit Court Judge John Themelis approved a plea bargain on July 16, ending a yearlong attempt to try Harwood on a first-degree murder charge for Chao's death. According to lawyers involved in the case, a trial had been delayed as both the prosecution and the defense completed their psychiatric evaluation of Harwood.

Michael Kaminkow, an attorney for Harwood, told the *Blade* that although psychiatric experts agreed that Harwood suffered from obsessive-compulsive disorder, they could not agree on whether he was criminally responsible or not. In addition, Chao's family wished to avoid a public trial.

E-mail between Chao and Harwood that was retrieved after the murder suggested that the two shared an intimate relationship.

"We once again revealed and expressed ourselves to deeper levels and found profound joy in our bond," wrote Chao to Harwood in one letter.

David Gervasini, an attorney for Harwood, told the *Washington Post* that Harwood and Chao had shared "some sexual contact."

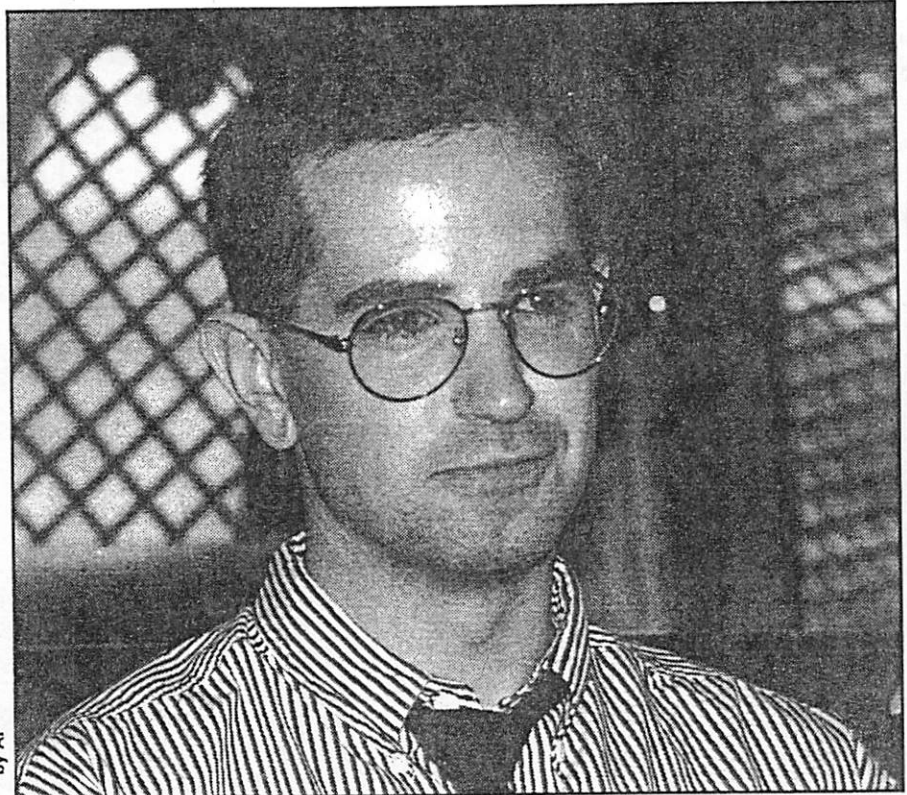
"But I don't think they were Gay lovers," Gervasini told the *Post*.

Kaminkow, however, declined to confirm or deny Gervasini's statement on the nature of Harwood's relationship with Chao.

Ahmet Hisim, a prosecutor for the state attorney's office, said that Harwood had alleged sexual contact between him and Chao, but that it was used as "an inflammatory issue."

"Harwood claimed that there was some type of sexual contact and that he was sexually attacked," said Hisim. "But there was no proof, except for the fact that he kept bringing it up."

Harwood, a chemistry major, and



Robert Harwood Jr. (above) was sentenced to 35 years in prison for the murder of fellow student Rex Chao.

Chao, a political science major, had met through the Johns Hopkins University College Republicans group.

The friendship had lasted for over a year, but had deteriorated. Suzanne Hubbard, Chao's girlfriend at the time, said that once Chao decided to end the friendship with Harwood, Harwood began stalking Chao. Eventually, Chao filed a complaint with the university's dean of students, saying that Harwood was harassing him.

In a letter to Chao, Harwood said that Chao's relationship with Hubbard was an attempt to "hide who you are and provide temporary and superficial comfort from your deeply hurt and disturbed state." Harwood, in a journal that was turned over to the police, wrote that Chao had violated "myself, my rights, and my dignity."

On April 10, 1996, Chao attended a meeting of the College Republicans in

which the group was to elect new officers. Harwood was outside the meeting room, handing flyers to those entering. The flyer accused Chao of drug use and of having sex with another male student that revealed Chao's "true sexuality."

Despite Harwood's attempt to put Chao in disfavor with the group, Chao was unanimously voted to be the group's new president. Witnesses told police that Harwood followed Chao and Hubbard as they came out of the meeting and walked back to their rooms. Harwood then pulled out a gun, shot Chao in the head, then shot him again in the chest as Chao lay on the ground.

Police arrested Harwood minutes later, after a security guard saw him walking from the scene of the shooting.

Lawyers said that Harwood could have his first parole hearing after serving half for his sentence. ▼