

Gay judge's suicide attempt shocks town

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BARTOW, Fla. — In his darkest moment, before he attached the garden hose to the exhaust pipe of his red Firebird, Polk Circuit Judge William Norris Jr. had one final wish for his children.

"Don't let them escape," he scrawled on yellow legal paper, his suicide journal. "Make them shoulder the guilt. Make them feel what

I feel right now, alone, alone, alone."

The suicide was a failure. The judge survived.

Only the week before, someone — anonymously — mailed photographs to the judge's children, Kathi, 35, and Billy, 21.

The pictures, Kathi said, showed her father "involved in homosexual acts."

Like most people in this small town of 17,000, Kathi did not know the judge was gay.

The news came as an awful shock. She and her dad stopped speaking. The Norris family, already severed during two divorces, was ripped apart again.

The judge soaked up his bitterness with Beefeater and worked toward a decision: suicide. For three gin-blurred days, he planned his exit in a diary, recording cutting remarks about his children — calling his daughter "Mrs Rich Bitch" and his son the "viper" —

and philosophizing about society's provincialism.

"I'm not running away," he wrote, underlining the words. "I just choose not to play the game anymore. . . . Sexuality vs. service to other people is irrelevant. Why don't people understand that?"

For his tombstone, the judge selected a

lyric from the British rock group Pink Floyd: "And if I show you my dark side, will you still hold me tonight?"

Then he wrapped the end of a green garden hose with newspaper, wedged it in the tail pipe of his '89 Pontiac and ran the hose through the driver's window. A death trap.

A different case

The attempted suicide of William Arthur Norris Jr. at 9:14 p.m. March 10, 1990, made headlines. Most suicides, even failed ones, are kept mercifully quiet. The victim is encircled by protective friends and family who cope privately with the tragedy while doing their best to keep outsiders where they belong. Police are understanding. The press is discreet. Grisly details are not for public consumption.

This was different. Norris, 55, is a public figure, one of Polk County's most popular jurists. He is active in state judicial affairs, a vocal poll-ticker in Tallahassee, a man whose friends from the old days at the Uni-

versity of Florida now occupy positions of influence throughout the state.

Then there was the diary. But for it, the details of the judge's private life — the *why* behind his death wish — might have remained a family secret. But police, reluctant to cover up or suppress public information about an individual so prominent, felt obligated to release copies of the 11-page "journal of death." After that, there was no way to dam the tide of talk that engulfed Bartow and the hinterlands beyond.

The city saloons and the citrus groves, the phosphate mines and the old-fashioned pharmacies are filled with folks speculating about the judge's troubles: his aborted suicide, his drinking habits, his sexual preferences.

"It's a gossip town," said resident Mya Powell. "Typical Mayberry. No way to keep a secret."

It's also a Baptist town. Scan the radio stations any morning, and more times than not, you'll get preaching. The biggest traffic jam of the week is on Sunday, right after services let out. Family life and the Bible are sacred. Homosexuality, in most circles, is despicable.

Especially for a public official.

"A lot of people just don't think a gay has a right to be anything," said retired lawyer Eddie Flood. "You gotta know Bartow. Some things just don't fly."

G.W. "Buck" Mann Jr. is typical. "I'm old-fashioned," the citrus grower said. "Man was made to love a woman. I don't think any homosexual is qualified to be a judge. They got their own problems."

Occupied with gossip

In past weeks, while the judge sought counsel from colleagues and comfort from friends, the people of Polk County occupied themselves with gossip. A cartoon about the judge's fall from grace turned up on a bulletin board at the strip mines. A former sheriff put a message on his answering machine for the "pompous, arrogant, smart-assed judge."

"Hang in there, Norris," the voice entreats. "God will forgive you — but we won't."

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