

Editorial: Morgue case was never about art

Sunday, 15 August 2004

Three years after a photographer posed corpses in the Hamilton County morgue for pictures in a book he was making, the story still prompts ripples of revulsion through those who hear it.

We are dismayed that photographer Thomas Condon's reaction to the end of the criminal case this week is still that he was just a misunderstood artist. "I was not playing with dead bodies," he said in an interview Tuesday. "What I was after was to bring something that hadn't been done or seen before ... into a context that is positive and revitalizing."

This case was never about art or photography. It was about a gross violation of the privacy of grief. If a member of your family is killed and the body is sent to the coroner for an autopsy, you should not have to wonder if its going to end up as a prop in somebody's art project.

Condon did not act alone in this matter. He didn't break into the morgue. He was given wide access to the facility, first as part of a crew that was asked by Coroner Carl Parrott to put together a training video, and later because people apparently just got used to seeing him around. He didn't have to sneak bodies out of the storage drawers; people in the morgue helped him. Officials in the coroner's office noticed him taking the pictures, but nobody thought it out of place enough to raise an alarm. What he did would never have come to light if an employee at the commercial processing company where he left the film to be developed had not called police.

Condon spent a year in jail after being convicted of multiple charges of abuse of a corpse. Prosecutor Mike Allen dropped one remaining count for which a new trial had been ordered by the Ohio First District Court of Appeals. Pursuing that charge would have been a waste of time and money, as it is unlikely a conviction would have resulted in significant new jail time.

The prosecutor also had gone after Dr. Jonathan Tobias, a deputy coroner who had helped Condon, but all charges against Tobias eventually ended in acquittal or dismissal. And Tobias was not the only member of the coroner's staff who knew Condon was spending time in the morgue with his camera, a fact central to civil suits against the county filed by families of those whose bodies were abused.

The criminal case ended with Condon, but everyone from the photographer, to the attendents and pathologists, to the coroner shares in the shame of this sorry story.

http://www.enquirer.com/editions/2004/08/13/editorial_morgue.html