

Nation-wide vigil marks Curtis' birthday and protests the controversial New Jersey trial

By PAULETTE PEIROL

Over 35 people gathered outside the American consulate in Toronto last Saturday in support of Bruce Curtis, a 23-year-old Nova Scotian native serving a 20 year prison sentence for aggravated manslaughter in New Jersey.

This marked the third annual Toronto vigil. Similar protests were held in Vancouver, Ottawa, Montreal, and Halifax.

Toronto supporters included Curtis' sister Anne, 28, a Toronto doctor, and his Canadian lawyers, Gerald Morris, a University of Toronto law professor, and Jennie Hatfield Lyon, a human rights advocate.

About half of those in attendance came by chartered bus from the Paris/Brantford area, where many of Curtis' relatives live. "I hope we won't have to come back again next year," said Lorna Tose, who has come from Paris to attend all three Toronto vigils, despite freezing temperatures each year. "It was quite a respectable crowd," Tose said, "although it is slightly smaller than last year."

The vigil was held to commemorate Curtis' birthday (January 21), and to protest what many feel was an unfair trial. In July 1982, Curtis was visiting the home of a school friend, Scott Franz, in New Jersey, finding himself in the midst of a volatile household. On the morning of July 5, Franz shot his step-father, Alfred Podgis, in an upstairs bedroom. After hearing the shots, Curtis claims he panicked and accidentally shot Franz's mother, Rosemary Podgis, downstairs. The parents died immediately and the boys, both 18-year-olds at the time, hid the evidence and fled the scene.

Franz and Curtis received the same sentence—20 years, with

parole eligibility after 10 years—although Franz was convicted of murder while Curtis was convicted of aggravated manslaughter, a less serious charge.

According to New Jersey law, Curtis must serve half of his sentence, 10 years, before he is eligible for parole. In Canada, however, parole eligibility is one third of a sentence. If transferred to a Canadian prison, Curtis could be paroled in two years or less if his clemency petition for a reduced sentence is approved.

Last November, New Jersey became the 26th state to ratify an international Prisoner Transfer Treaty. Yet the regulations for the treaty have not yet been finalized in that state.

Curtis' lawyers have been told that it will take up to one year before a transfer application can be filed. Meanwhile, Morris and Hatfield Lyons are completing the Canadian part of the application for transfer. The lawyers are afraid, however, that New Jersey prosecutors are lobbying to be granted veto powers over all transfers.

If moved to a Canadian prison, Curtis would likely be eligible for a day release program to enable him to attend university. In 1982, after graduating from Kings-Edgehill school in NS, Curtis, who once represented his school on CBC's *Reach for the Top* program, was accepted at Dalhousie University in Halifax. He is presently taking correspondence courses from Queen's University.

At the Bordentown Youth Correctional Institution, where Curtis is an inmate, he is known as a "model prisoner," according to Hatfield Lyon, and spends much of his time teaching illiterate inmates and writing correspondence for them.

"Institutionalization leads to dehumanization, especially at Bor-

dentown, an old facility, where prisoners are kept indoors for eight months of the year," said Hatfield Lyon.

Of the vigil, Hatfield Lyon noted, "It says a lot that people are supportive in such hard economic times and such an era of conservatism."

The lawyer said that the Curtis case has been receiving "more favourable attention and publicity" in the New Jersey media since the treaty was ratified. Hatfield Lyon also said that following the recent release of David Hayes' *No Easy Answers*, a book about the Curtis case published by Penguin Books Canada, film companies such as Lorimar Productions in the US have "expressed an interest in optioning the book."

Campus group's film sparks debate

By MIKE KOHN

A recent film session held at Osgoode Hall by the York chapter of Peace Through Strength Organization, featured some controversial information about the Nicaraguan Sandanista regime which sparked off some heated debate.

The stated goals of "Peace through Strength," include the establishment of a communist free zone in Central America, and maximum financial backing for the Contra rebels who are fighting the Nicaraguan Sandanista regime. The organization also supports President Reagan's proposed space-based defense system, popularly known as Star Wars.

Peace through Strength spokesman, Mike Payne said that his organization is trying to establish a strong York following. "On Tuesday, our first table will be set up in Central Square," Payne noted, "so everyone



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can see both sides of the arms race and world peace coin."

Media reports in the past have suggested that Klu Klux Klan and Western Guard elements have affiliated with the Peace through Strength organization. When queried about this, Payne said, "I don't know about the U.S., but Miroslaw Matuzewski, the Canadian Coalition's chairman, has intentionally avoided introducing chapters into small towns where we can't monitor the results."

One of the videos on display, "Crisis in the Americas," explicitly documents the alleged atrocities of the Sandanista regime. Included were claims that the Sandanista's smuggle drugs to American youth in order to buy arms. In addition, the movie accused the Sandanistas of cutting the achilles tendons of Misquito Indians when they interned them in camps.

The controversial nature of the videos created an air of heated discussion among those present. Law student Peter Thurton said, "I see people all over the world starving by the day. I see these men (in the videos) in suits and uniforms behind big desks saying that the price of Star Wars—\$300 per American—is worth it, and I think, wow, that's a lot to someone living in a ghetto."

Andrew Kavchak, head of the York chapter of Peace through Strength, cited that refugees from East-bloc countries who could attest to the inhumane practices of the Soviet regime, were present. One, a Polish emigre who asked not to be identified, said, "I lived there (in Poland) for 27 years, and all the young people want to get out. I've been to the Ukraine also, poor people everywhere, if the Soviets let people go into the West, there would be a revolution today?"

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