

The logo for shreveporttimes.com, featuring the text "shreveporttimes.com" in a white, sans-serif font with a slight shadow effect, set against a dark blue rectangular background.

October 15, 2008

Judge convicts three in Hope Youth Ranch teen's death

By Vickie Welborn
vwelborn@gannett.com

MINDEN – Three former employees of Hope Youth Ranch were convicted this afternoon of negligent homicide and cruelty to a juvenile in connection with the September 2005 death of a Haughton teen who was in their care.

District Judge Parker Self returned the guilty verdicts in the bench trial after excusing himself from the bench for only a short period of time. The verdicts end three days of testimony.

Convicted were Anthony L. Combs, of Ruston, Arthur G. Henderson III, of Cotton Valley, and Kelton Greenard, of Minden. All were immediately taken into custody. A presentence investigation was ordered and sentencing will take place in four to six weeks. Each faces up to five years on the negligent homicide charge.

"I know our victim's family is satisfied. This was a tough one; one of the toughest we've had," said Bossier-Webster District Attorney Schuyler Marvin.

The prosecution was difficult because of the number of defendants, which at first numbered eight, and the number witnesses who were scattered in various parts of the state who had to be interviewed and later called to trial. And there was a hurdle that had to be overcome at the initial stage of the investigation with the autopsy report of Alex Harris' death.

"They were not conflicting," Marvin said of the coroner's reports. "But we had to get all of that worked out."

The first report of forensic pathology Dr. Frank Peretti, of Arkansas, was inconclusive. An addendum pinpointed Harris' death as hyperthermia and blunt force head trauma.

Witnesses testified over the three-day trial that 12-year-old Harris was among a group of boys housed at Hope Youth Ranch, a residential treatment program for young boys, who were forced to run as a punishment. Harris was denied water and later collapsed and older teens picked him up and partially dragged him to another location. One picked up Harris but dropped him when Harris started vomiting.

Witnesses testified that Harris, who appeared lifeless, was allowed to lie in the sun for hours before he was moved and medical treatment was summoned. Harris died on the premises but was not officially declared dead until he reached Minden Medical Center.

Of the eight who were originally arrested in connection with Harris' death, charges were dismissed early on against two. Charges were dismissed Monday against three more: Willis Jean Doyle and Marcus D. Jones, both of Castor, and Tasha G. Jackson, of Haynesville.