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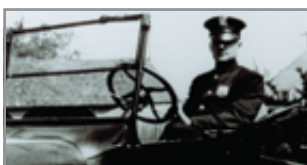
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ONLY IN NEWSDAY

Hate-crime

In jail awaiting sentencing for killing immigrant, Jeffrey Conroy insists he's not racist or violent

BY ANN GIVENS
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Jeffrey Conroy has a strong gut reaction to the now-famous photograph of himself, handcuffed and walking ramrod-straight in his white jumpsuit, his ice-blue eyes staring straight ahead.

"That's not me," said the 19-year-old Medford man in his first interview since he was arrested in November 2008 on charges that he stabbed and killed Ecuadorean immigrant Marcelo Lucero, 37, of Patchogue, after, prosecutors say, he and six other teens went on a mission to beat up Hispanics.

"I am not a racist. I am not a violent person. I am not a white supremacist," said Conroy, who has a swastika tattoo on one thigh that he said he got "stupidly" on a dare. "People made a judgment about me."

Last week, a Suffolk County jury convicted Conroy of first-degree manslaughter as a hate crime in Lucero's death, and second-degree attempted assault as a hate crime in attacks on three other Hispanic men. He faces 8 to 25 years in prison when State Supreme Court Justice Robert W. Doyle sentences him May 26.

His lawyer, William Keahon of Hauppauge, would not let him answer questions about the night of the crime — details about which Conroy testified in some detail during his monthlong trial. Keahon says Conroy plans to appeal his conviction.

The former athlete spoke instead about his upbringing in Medford, his feelings about minorities, and what he says are feel-

ings of sympathy for Lucero's family.

"I'm sorry for what happened to them," said Conroy, who took the stand and denied he had stabbed Lucero, saying another teenager was the killer. "I wish he wasn't dead."

Jurors said after the verdict that they did not find Conroy's testimony believable, though they also did not believe that he intended to kill Lucero.

Urged to display fun-loving side

Throughout the hourlong interview Friday afternoon in the Suffolk County jail, Conroy, dressed in a white button-down shirt and a black suit jacket, remained stoic, often looking down at the table in front of him or at a wall. He smiled rarely, usually after being prodded by Keahon, who urged him to display the fun-loving side of his personality that Conroy said friends knew in school.

In a separate interview, Conroy's parents, Lori and Robert, said their son is a joker who would wrestle playfully with his mom and who was the "life of the party" whenever the extended family got together. Of his son's serious demeanor now, Robert Conroy says, "Look what he's been through in the last 18 months. He doesn't know who to trust."

In the photos taken of Conroy just after he was arrested, his father said his son had just had his head shaved for wrestling season. He also was exhausted and afraid, he said.

"I'm outgoing. I have a good time," Jeffrey Conroy said when asked about his personality. "People say I look angry. I guess I

just look angry."

Growing up in a home of six children, Conroy said his parents taught him to treat everyone equally. Conroy said he has a half-sister who is Puerto Rican and a Colombian step-grandmother, and he is close with both of them. He said his girlfriend of five years, a freshman at Stony Brook University who has stood by him since his arrest, is half Puerto Rican and half Portuguese.

"There is no racism in my family," Conroy said. "None at all."

Conroy's father, who runs a nonprofit youth sports league, and who says his eldest son spent much of his time helping him coach children and repair equipment, said he tried to show his children by example how to treat people different from themselves. He said when he learned about the swastika tattoo from a television report after his son's arrest, he was stunned. "I don't think he knows what the true meaning of it is," he said. His mother added, "As soon as he gets out, he's having it removed."

"It was just a joke, but it's embarrassing," Conroy said Friday, looking down at his hands folded in his lap. "It doesn't mean anything to me."

He said he got the tattoo after he and a friend saw the HBO series "Oz" in which several prisoners have them.

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Says had friends of all races

At Patchogue-Medford High School, Conroy said he was friends with kids of all racial and ethnic backgrounds. But he admitted there were racists in his peer group.

"I don't like anyone picking on anyone, so that kind of bothered me," he said. He said generally he "didn't get involved" in racial conflicts, though he said there have been occasions when he



On Nov. 10, 2008, Jeffrey Conroy, then 17, is led out of the Fifth Precinct in Patchogue for arraignment



Lori and Robert Conroy say their son's manslaughter conviction surprised them.



convict talks

has defended people being bullied.

Both Conroy and his parents say they were truly taken aback when he was convicted of manslaughter. "I thought he was coming home with us," Robert Conroy said, looking into the distance, his breathing labored.

Still, Lori Conroy, who is a Sunday school teacher and a born-again Christian, said she and her church group pray often for Lucero and the family he left behind.

The Conroys say they are saddened that the Luceros will never see Marcelo again. While they will at least see their son in prison, they say losing him in their daily life helps them understand the Luceros' loss.

"[Visiting him in jail] is very unsatisfying, but afterward I do get a feeling of relief that I saw my son," Robert Conroy said.

Conroy, who is in protective custody in jail because of the white supremacist allegations, spends 22 hours a day alone in his cell, with one hour allowed outside it for showering and phone calls, and another hour allowed for exercise.

During the time in his cell — he can spread his arms and touch both walls — he said he often thinks about the future.

Before his arrest, he said, he dreamed of getting a college lacrosse scholarship, marrying his girlfriend and becoming a gym teacher. Now, even as he awaits what is likely to be a lengthy prison sentence, he says he still wishes for all that.

"I'm still hanging on to those things," he said.



Lucero

"I'm sorry for what happened to them. I wish he wasn't dead."

— Jeffrey Conroy, referring to the family of Ecuadorean immigrant Marcelo Lucero

