

Forensic psychiatrist speaks on the Abraham case: "When Nathaniel needed a system there was no system there for him"

Larry Roberts
10 November 1999

Gerald A. Shiener is a forensic psychiatrist who testified for the defense in the Nathaniel Abraham trial taking place in Pontiac, Michigan. The World Socialist Web Site spoke to Dr. Shiener outside the courtroom.

WSWS: You had the opportunity to review Nathaniel's records. What did they show about his mental abilities?

GS: That he was, at best, a very immature and developmentally disabled 11-year-old who was functioning at the level of a 6- to 8-year-old, who didn't have the ability to understand that there would be unintended consequences to his actions. The most compelling example of that was when he kept shooting even though "they told me not to shoot because I might get in trouble or someone might get hurt" because he wasn't aiming at anything. That's the concrete way that a small child thinks.

Many 11-year-olds think that way, and a 6- to 8-year-old would absolutely think that way. They'll be so concrete and so direct they couldn't imagine that if they weren't shooting at anyone that someone could get hurt.

WSWS: In other words, outside of the immediate activity they are involved in, they don't see beyond that?

GS: That's right. Their ability to see into the future, or to see what might happen, or to look at a range of possibilities—they are unable to do that, and that's on the basis of their brain development.

WSWS: Your testimony was important from the standpoint of educating adults about the intellectual capacity of children, particularly what you said about children having a smaller brain mass. Could you explain what you said about the stage of development of an 11-year-old?

GS: Yes. An 11-year-old has about 25 percent less brain mass than an adult. An adult's brain weighs about 2.5 pounds and an 11-year-old's weighs about 1.8 pounds. That's .7 of a pound, over half a pound of brain tissue that an 11-year-old will gain as he grows. And that tissue is important and serves a purpose.

The nature of brain tissue is different because the insulation and wiring of the brain becomes denser as you grow. And that means that an adult brain can activate certain discrete and small focal areas, whereas in a child a certain brain area is less focused, it's more general. That's why when kids get excited they start jumping and moving around. That's why they have to act because they stimulate broader areas of the brain when they become excited.

WSWS: In other words, they are unable to detect minute developments and changes?

GS: And differences. They cannot think the way adults think.

WSWS: Are you aware of a new bill that is pending in the US Congress similar to the law in Michigan that has been used to prosecute Nathaniel Abraham? Do you have any feelings about this?

GS: There is a strong tradition in psychiatry that it has always provided recommendations to the juvenile courts about the issue of social control and the behavior of adolescence. I think that's been there for a reason.

I think that it is very dangerous when you start holding small children like Nathaniel Abraham to the standard of behavior of an adult. There is a very good reason why we have a juvenile justice system, a separate justice system to deal with these kinds of behavior—even when they are fatal and lethal, even when a child shoots someone—because children are

different.

They can pass a federal law that adultizes children. I think it's only a way to appease the kind of outrage we have for out-of-control children, and the anger we have for the parents who fail to control them. But I don't think it solves the problem and I don't think it is good for society. All it will do is put a bunch of kids in jail; it will clog up the adult courts, and it will make for more trials like this one.

WSWS: What do think should be done with Nathaniel?

GS: I think we need to take a look at our juvenile justice system. I have very strong feelings about how we need a comprehensive program to address troubled youth. I think we need more psychiatric treatment to be available rather than less.

Michigan is the poster child for doing away with public mental health, and funding state mental health systems and residential care. That doesn't mean that I think it's right. I think it is a tragedy and the way the public mental health system has been dismantled in the state of Michigan is appalling.

I work in a community mental health center and I have for my entire career. From the time I was a medical student and resident at Sinai Hospital I have seen the funding and support for those programs dry up. I have seen the hospitals close. And I think we threw out the baby with the bath water.

We need residential facilities for youth, who are disadvantaged, and we need programs to teach them how to live in the community. That doesn't mean they need to be all community-based.

WSWS: The system failed Nathaniel and his family. They did not provide the type of assistance that he needed.

GS: I would put it differently. When Nathaniel needed a system there was no system there for him.



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