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Grieving families urge tougher law for killers of children

Assembly panel clears bill that extends life-without-parole to more murderers

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BY RICK HEPP
Star-Ledger Staff

A bill that would eliminate the chance of parole for anyone convicted of murdering someone under age 17 was approved by a committee yesterday after the families of two slain girls said its passage would give meaning to teens' shortened lives.

The bill, named "Judy and Nikki's Law" after Judy Cajuste and Nicole Giovanni, two 14-year-olds from Roselle who were brutally killed within months of one another, was approved 5-0 during the Assembly Judiciary Committee hearing at the Statehouse.

Cajuste was found dead in a Newark trash bin in January after disappearing from Abraham Clark High School after track practice. Giovanni, a Roselle Catholic High School freshman, was beaten to death at her home in February 2005; her mother was charged with the killing.

"This bill will show that Nikki and Judy did not die in vain, that their lives meant something and they had a purpose in life," said John Giovanni, Nicole's father. "If you murder a child, you will go to jail for the rest of your life. No more wiggle room."

Yves F. Aubourg, a spokesman for the Cajuste family, said they hope the publicity surrounding the bill will help authorities catch Cajuste's killer.

"In our case, we still don't know who committed this crime," Aubourg said. "We hope that keeping her name alive and keeping the pressure on that the criminal will know we're going to get him."

Both families said the proposal is needed even though the bill could not be applied retroactively to the killers of the two girls.

"This bill will protect any other youth," Aubourg said.

Under current law, murderers who are not sentenced to death face 30 years to life in prison, with no parole for at least 30 years. A life term with no chance of parole is mandated for anyone found guilty of murdering a child under age 14 if the case involves sexual assault.

The bill would extend the life-without-parole penalty to cover the murder of a child 16 years old or younger, whether or not sexual assault is involved.

The bill's sponsor, Assemblyman Neil Cohen (D-Union), said it would address what he called "a glitch in the statute that remained unrecognized until these two situations tragically occurred."

The bill (A2673) must now be voted on by the full Assembly. An identical bill in the state Senate (S1869) has yet to be heard.

Rick Hepp covers criminal justice. He may be reached at rhepp@starledger.com or (609) 989-0398.

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