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Leaders of parade protest acquitted

Columbus Day march at issue

Defendants ask the city to halt future parades and dismiss charges pending against some 200 others.

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 Howard Pankratz

Denver Post Staff Writer

The eight leaders of the protest who blocked the 2004 Columbus Day parade were acquitted Thursday, and they immediately asked the city to halt similar Columbus Day parades in the future.

"What this verdict says is that hate speech should be relegated to the past," said Glenn Morris, one of the defendants.

Morris also said that charges pending against dozens of others should be dismissed.

"It is time for the mayor and city attorney to drop all the charges. We call on the people of Denver to demand that all the charges be dropped," Morris said.

Parade organizer and Sons of Italy-New Generation founder George Vendegnina couldn't be reached for comment. Parade organizers have said they were honoring America's earliest explorer as well as their own Italian heritage.

Just hours before Thursday's verdict, during closing arguments, lawyers for the eight described them as "heroes" and the embodiment of the current civil rights movement.

Defense lawyers David Lane and **Jim Castle** asked the jury to acquit the eight of a charge of failing to obey a lawful police order "because it is the right thing to do."

They said the parade celebrated the demise of Native Americans and was ethnically intimidating to all American Indians, especially their children.

Eric Ruderman, a lawyer and jury foreman, said the main reason for the not-guilty verdicts was the jury's finding that the parade contained "strong elements of ethnic intimidation" directed at Native Americans.

"All we heard was that Native Americans definitely felt there was a strong element of ethnic intimidation," Ruderman said.

Ruderman added that if intimidation continues, the parade should no longer be held.

"The protesters stood up for what was right," Ruderman said. "They did the right thing for the right reason."

Ruderman added that "people should care" about what the protesters are saying.

The protesters believe that Columbus was a slave trader who participated in the genocide of American Indians.

Prosecutor Bob Reynolds said he doesn't know if the remaining cases will be dropped.

But Reynolds said the eight were on trial not for their speech but for blocking a parade that had been approved by the city of Denver.

Reynolds said the leaders and other protesters who were in the street ignored three orders to disperse. They could have stayed behind the barricades that lined the route and voiced their opinions without violating the law, he said.

"They broke a law to make a political point. Good for them. Take the punishment, whatever it may be," Reynolds said.

Charges were filed against more than 200 people following the Oct. 9 Columbus Day parade, which was delayed for about 90 minutes when the protesters linked arms and knelt in the middle of the route.

The eight asked to be tried first. Those acquitted are Morris, Ward Churchill, Natsu Saito, Reginald Holmes, Nita Gonzales, Leroy Lemos, Glenn Spagnuolo and Troy Lynn Yellow Wood.

Morris said the acquittals were another failure by Denver to prosecute those protesting Columbus Day.

The jurors, who embraced the defendants after the verdict, said they relied

heavily on testimony from the defendants, who said they were exercising their free-speech rights.

But Reynolds said the defendants chose to defy the orders of police, who were concerned that public safety was being jeopardized.

He also said the defendants claimed they didn't hear the three announcements over police bullhorns to disperse. Reynolds said videos showed that the protesters cheered loudly each time they were told to leave but chose to stay.

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