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## McIlveen witness tells trial 'we were picked on for being Catholic'

BY Staff reporter

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The trial of murdered Ballymena schoolboy Michael McIlveen heard yesterday that he and two friends were initially picked on because they were "Catholics – no other reason".

However, Liam Phillips, who was chased with 15-year-old Michael denied that they

had "provoked" the attackers by calling them "Orange bastards".

Mr Phillips was giving evidence at the Antrim Crown Court trial of the six remaining Ballymena youths facing charges arising out of the killing of the teenager, who died from head injuries in hospital on May 8 2006, the day after he was allegedly bludgeoned with a baseball bat and punched and kicked over 60 times.

During a videoed interview played to the court yesterday, the now 19-year-old claimed the 30 to 40 Protestant youths they met that night with another friend knew Michael and their friend were Catholics, and, "they certainly know I'm a Catholic".

Mr Phillips said that sometime after the attack he later "rang a mate's phone" who told him he'd tried to get the schoolboy to go to hospital, but "Michael didn't want to, he said he'd just sleep it off".

Denying murder are a 17-year-old who can't be named for legal reasons, 19-year-old Jeff Colin Lewis of Rosssdale, Christopher Francis Kerr (22) of Carnduff Drive, Aaron Cavana Wallace (20) Moat Road and Christopher Andrew McLeister (18) of Knock Crescent, all Ballymena.

Another 20-year-old, Mervyn Wilson Moon of Douglas Terrace in the Co Antrim town, has already pleaded guilty to the murder and is awaiting sentence.

Mr Phillips claimed that he, Michael and a friend had gone that night to the area of Ballymena's cinema to look for friends among a group of up to 40 Protestant youths after being "invited" earlier that day.

However, a drunken Lewis allegedly offered to fight all three of them, allegedly having picked on them "cause we're Catholics and he thought we're down here to start trouble".

He said that normally they would not be subjected to sectarian abuse and agreed with interviewing police that sectarian name calling "was totally unusual".

At the same time he told the court his father called him on his mobile phone telling him to come home. He claimed that as he went to walk away, "Lewis and a few others started calling after me, calling me a Fenian and calling me a yellow belly and that".

Mr Phillips claimed he decided to stay when "a few of them were actually being dead on" and some even said, "nobody's going to touch you".

However, he said that his friend overheard a plot to give them "a kicking" and "whispered to me to get Michael McIlveen and go".

Mr Phillips said they were chased and after reaching an alleyway the fighting started.

While under cross-examination from Brian McCartney QC, for Wallace, Mr Phillips admitted that while he had heard friends "using the expression Orange bastards", he denied saying it that night.

The trial continues

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