

Cameras in the courtroom make history  
By ANN TABB-CULPEPPER/Starkville Daily News

As if to make up for putting restrictions on the media regarding the case of Tyler Edmonds, Judge Jim Kitchens permitted broadcast and still camera coverage of Monday's hearing in Oktibbeha County Circuit Court for the first time.

The presence of cameras in the courtroom Monday was a first for the 16th Circuit Court District that covers Clay, Oktibbeha, Lowndes and Noxubee counties.

"Typically the court gets 48 hours, and there were some objections to one specific area but we covered that in chambers, but we will allow the press to have one still camera and one video camera in the courtroom, so you will have to share pictures," said Circuit Court Judge Jim Kitchens at the opening of a hearing in the Tyler Edmonds capital murder case on Monday.

On April 16, the Mississippi Supreme Court adopted rules that permit broadcast and still camera coverage of trial and appellate court proceedings, with some restrictions and final determination on a case-by-case basis under the discretion of individual judges.

The Mississippi Rules for Electronic and Photographic Coverage of Judicial Proceedings took effect in July and expire Dec. 31, 2004, unless extended by order of the Supreme Court, basically giving all media outlets in the state a trial period on the new freedom.

Since the adoption of the new rules, news agencies have filmed such high profile trials as the murder trial of Stephanie Stephens, who was convicted of the 2001 death of her husband, Dr. David Stephens, in Forrest County Circuit Court last month.

In the original announcement by the state Supreme Court, Justice James E. Graves Jr., chairman of the Media and the Courts Study Committee that recommended allowing camera coverage of all state courts, called the rules "a milestone for the court system."

"It's a step in the right direction in terms of informing the public about the justice system," Graves said. "It brings Mississippi in line with the majority of the other states which allow camera access to courtrooms."

The rules apply to the Mississippi Supreme Court, Court of Appeals, chancery courts, circuit courts and county courts.

The Code of Judicial Conduct, however, prohibits camera coverage of justice courts and municipal courts.

Supreme Court Chief Justice Edwin L. Pittman explained in the April ruling that these proceedings were excluded from the rules because they are not courts of record -- proceedings that are transcribed for purposes of appeal.

The court will review the camera access rules after a trial period.