

A Word the Town Did Not Want To Hear: Rape

By MARIA LAURINO

WHEN I met Leslie Faber (a pseudonym) in December 1992, the day she testified against four of the boys accused of raping her in the basement of a Glen Ridge, N.J., home with a bat, a broom and a stick, she was shy and nervous. She had known most of these handsome, popular athletes — the dream dates of high school girls — since childhood, and she still believed they could be her friends. If she could only forget that three years earlier 13 boys (6 eventually left) had gathered in the suburban basement of Kevin and Kyle Scherzer to sexually abuse and humiliate her: "It was set up like a movie," Leslie, a mentally retarded girl with an I.Q. of 64, told a packed courtroom that morning. "There were chairs there and a big couch and stuff."

My brother Bob Laurino, an assistant prosecutor who spent four years of his life working on this case, introduced me to Leslie. I was moved by her eyes, which searched for approval, and her instinct to ingratiate. She was tall, chubby, somewhat awkward in manner, with short-cropped hair that framed a round face. Hardly, as the defense tried to paint her, a Lolita-like seductress, a sexual cynosure whose breasts magnetized boys.

Tomorrow night at 9, ABC will broadcast the movie "Our Guys," based on the 1997 book by Bernard Lefkowitz, a Columbia University journalism professor, that documents the difficulty of trying the rape case of a 17-year-old mentally impaired girl, to whom he gave the pseudonym Leslie (portrayed by Heather Matarazzo), in a town that wants to protect its image — and its boys.

The movie adopts Mr. Lefkowitz's searing evaluation of an American culture that reveres athleticism and good looks and shows little compassion for the mentally retarded. Its examination of a value system that glorifies winners and mocks outcasts is particularly poignant in light of the shootings in Littleton, Colo., where the high school massacre appears to have been caused by two students' rage against their outsider status.

Six years after the defendants Christopher Archer, Kyle and Kevin Scherzer (twin brothers) and Bryant Grober were convicted of this crime, viewers will get a glimpse of life in Glen Ridge and the moral climate that led to the 1989 rape. The defendants lived in a world in which every institution — the school, the police force, the courts — seemed tailor-made to protect the boys' status as first-class citizens. Even after they were convicted, Judge R. Benjamin Cohen refused to sentence them to jail, allowing them to remain free on bail for years until their appeals were rejected. In

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1997, Mr. Archer and the Scherzers were sent to a medium-security prison with a campuslike setting.

"The story was basically subversive," said Guy Ferland, explaining his interest in directing the movie. "It's about people trying to be heard, understood and respected, who are up against the conventions of society."

At the trial's conclusion in 1993, there had been some interest in making a film, but ultimately the networks rejected the idea, fearful of depicting the rape of a mentally retarded girl with a baseball bat and a broomstick.

The publication of Mr. Lefkowitz's book, "Our Guys: The Glen Ridge Rape and the Secret Life of the Perfect Suburb," broadened the story, but ABC was still wary of the rape scene, which appears in a flashback at the movie's conclusion; the network sent many communications to Mr. Ferland to insure that it was not graphic.

As Mr. Lefkowitz captured them in his

A suburb tries to shield a group of 'nice boys' who raped a retarded girl:

The Glen Ridge case becomes a film.

book, this true story has characters that seem ready-made for a television movie: the hometown detective Sheila Byron (called Kelly Brooks in the movie and played by Ally Sheedy), whose investigation led to the arrest of her boss's son, Richard Corcoran Jr., who was also in the Scherzer basement, after Leslie accused him of inserting a stick into her vagina; a black student (one of three African-Americans in the graduating class) who refuses the boys' request to videotape a repeat assault on Leslie and is ostracized from the white suburban enclave because he reports the rape; and my brother Bob (played by Eric Stoltz), who is drawn to the case because we have an older, mentally retarded sibling who, like Leslie, was taunted in childhood.

The oddity of my watching a family member's life packaged for the broad strokes of television was not lost on Mr. Stoltz, who has played several other real-life characters in film. He described "the enormous amount of guilt" he experiences as an actor when "there is no possible way to represent all the complexities of a person's character."

"Our Guys" chronicles the Glen Ridge case over four years, from the accusation of rape, through the denials by townspeople, to the arrests and finally to the trial. The director did not want to reveal the athletes' full cruelty until the end of the film, so viewers see little of the disturbing behavior

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that Mr. Lefkowitz meticulously documented. There are no scenes, for instance, of Kevin Scherzer's proclivity to unzip his pants and masturbate in class while teachers chose to look the other way; or of the boys' practice of "voyeurism," in which one would have sex with a girl as his friends hid in the room and watched; or of Chris Archer's obscene telephone calls to Leslie for over a year; or of the Scherzer twins' childhood practical joke in which they forced Leslie to eat dog feces.

"This rape was not a surprise if you look at the history of these guys and the town," Mr. Lefkowitz said in an interview. "It was almost a logical outcome of their behavior. And the victim in this case happened to be retarded. But I interviewed young women who said, 'It could have been me.'"

The susceptibilities of mentally retarded people, their desire to please and their desperate striving to fit in

have made them easy prey for sexual abuse. According to the Arc, a national advocacy group for the mentally retarded, 90 percent of this population is believed to be subject to some kind of sexual abuse, and usually the victim knows the abuser.

As the movie documents, the victim, rather than the boys, appeared to be on trial; she was called a slut and accused of "wanting it," even if "it" happened to be the wide end of a bat. One of the most difficult aspects in trying the case was Leslie's extraordinary desire to please, which made her frequently change her testimony. Ms. Matarazzo (who starred in the 1996 film "Welcome to the Dollhouse") captures Leslie's confused, concentrated stare as she both recounts and rescinds what happened to her, depending on who asks the questions. Yet I missed Leslie's pluckiness and assertiveness, which also emerged on the witness stand, in a performance that emphasizes her childlike innocence.

Ten years later — having lived through the case, read the book and

seen the movie — I am still fascinated by the different analyses that people intimately involved with or affected by this story have lent to it. Perhaps the brutality of the rape has functioned as a kind of Rorschach test, whose interpretation depends on one's vantage point.

My brother, who still heads the Sexual Assault and Rape Analysis Unit in Newark, considers the case an example of how people with mental disabilities are routinely sexually abused. Mr. Lefkowitz views the Glen Ridge rape as a broader indictment of our culture and how parents rear boys. And Mr. Stoltz expressed a judgment that touched his own craft. He equated the treatment of "omnipotent" jocks, members of an elite club, to that of actors.

"It seems that whatever we do is somehow beyond reproach — murder, rape, drunk driving — as long as we go on a TV show and apologize," Mr. Stoltz said. "The whole story is representative of a much larger cult of celebrity with which western society is completely entranced." □