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Media tune out torture death of Arkansas boy

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THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Most of the nation has not heard about two homosexual men who face the death penalty in Arkansas, charged with raping and torturing a 13-year-old boy to death last month.

The brutal crime against Prairie Grove, Ark., seventh-grader Jesse Dirkhising -- who was raped repeatedly and suffocated with his own underwear in the pre-dawn hours of Sept. 26 -- was reported by news organizations in Arkansas and also covered by newspapers in Oklahoma and Tennessee.

But the boy's death did not receive national media attention. Tim Graham, director of media analysis for the Media Research Center, said he is not surprised.

"Nobody wants to say anything negative about homosexuals. Nobody wants to be seen on the wrong side of that issue," said Mr. Graham, who sees "political correctness" at work.

But David Smith, spokesman for a major homosexual lobbying group, the Human Rights Campaign, said Thursday of the Jesse Dirkhising case: "This has nothing to do with gay people."

The muted press reaction to the Dirkhising slaying starkly contrasts with coverage of the murder of Matthew Shepard, a homosexual University of Wyoming freshman who was beaten to death last October.

Christopher D. Plumlee, deputy prosecuting attorney for Benton County, Ark., who investigated Jesse's death, admits he was a "little surprised" at the limited coverage this "horrible crime against a child" received.

Joshua Macave Brown, 22, and Davis Don Carpenter,

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38, described as homosexual "lovers" in a police affidavit, have both been charged with capital murder and six counts of rape and are being held without bond in connection with Jesse's death.

The accused killers pleaded not guilty at an arraignment earlier this month and face another court date Dec. 8. Mr. Plumlee said their trial is scheduled for April 10, 2000.

Mr. Carpenter was a friend of Jesse's parents, Tina Yates and Miles Yates Jr., and the boy had been staying with the two men at their apartment in Rogers, Ark., on weekends for two months prior to his death, Mr. Plumlee said. The prosecutor said the child's family had been falsely told Jesse helped out at a Rogers beauty salon Mr. Carpenter managed.

According to the affidavit, Mr. Brown told police that on the morning of Sept. 26, he sneaked up on the boy, tied his hands behind his back, placed his pair of undershorts in the teen's mouth and secured the briefs with a bandana and duct tape. He said he blindfolded the youth, bound him to a bed and repeatedly sodomized him.

Mr. Brown said he went to the kitchen to get a sandwich and that when he returned to the bedroom, Jesse was not breathing. He alerted his roommate, who called 911.

Asked about Mr. Carpenter's role during the crime, Mr. Brown said Mr. Carpenter stood at the bedroom door and masturbated as he watched. Police also recovered notes they believe implicate Mr. Carpenter in planning the crime.

Mr. Plumlee would not speculate on why this slaying received such scant coverage. But "this was murder and rape in an area that has a low crime rate, a particularly low rate of violent crime. We generally don't have crimes with this degree of brutality here," he said.

He added he sees local outrage at the "torture" Jesse endured. "But I don't see outrage directed at homosexuals," he said.

News stories published about the crime, to date, have not indicated the suspects are homosexuals.

Jack Stokes, director of employee publications for Associated Press, confirmed Thursday that AP ran stories about the case on state and local wires but not on its national wires. "I do not know why the story has not moved nationally, but it's a continuing story, so that could change," he said late Thursday. AP last covered the story Oct. 11, when the two suspects were arraigned.

By contrast, the day after Mr. Shepard's Oct. 8, 1998, beating in Wyoming, the Associated Press national wire carried its first 400-word story by staff writer E.N. Smith headlined: "Openly gay student critically injured in Wyoming attack."

The next day, Oct. 10, AP produced a 700-word story with the headline: "Gay student clings to life after savage beating." On Oct. 11, AP moved a 500-word story headlined: "Call for tougher laws after attack on gay student." A search through Associated Press on-line archives showed the Shepard story was reported as a national story every day for a week following the beating.

Barbara Levinson, a spokeswoman for "NBC Nightly News," said, "We did not cover" the Dirkhising case. Given that the broadcast is only 30 minutes long, she said, "There are many crime stories that don't make it on the air."

Another network spokeswoman said the story of Jesse's killing has not been presented on "Today" or "Dateline NBC" either.

A spokeswoman for CNN said, "Our affiliate station in Atlanta was tracking the story. But the week it happened, there was also Hurricane Floyd, the nuclear power plant explosion in Japan, the London train wreck, and the flare-up in East Timor."

The spokeswoman could not say definitively whether CNN reported anything about the Arkansas case. She said the people who would know had already left for the day.

Paul McMasters, national ombudsman for the Freedom Forum, a private media foundation, acknowledged he had not heard about the Dirkhising murder until Thursday when a reporter called and inquired. "I'm at a loss to explain why a story like this didn't get more national play," he said. "We don't know how many stories just like this one don't make it to the national news."

One person angered that the Jesse Dirkhising killing has not received wider coverage is former Louisiana state lawmaker David Duke, the one-time Ku Klux Klan leader who describes himself as a "national white civil rights activist."

Mr. Duke said Thursday the media should be covering the Dirkhising case with the "same vigor" it reported Mr. Shepard's death.

"There has been no outrage and no candlelight vigils for Jesse Dirkhising," even though the murder was "even more heinous than the Shepard case because the victim was a child who was literally raped to death by two male homosexuals," said Mr. Duke.

But Mr. Smith of Human Rights Campaign countered: "This is a desperate political ploy and a comeback attempt by a failed neo-Nazi, who hasn't won a major election since he was elected Grand Wizard."