

Small-town predators

The rape and murder of a 13-year-old boy roils Arkansas, but not the national press » by CANDI CUSHMAN in Rogers, Ark.

WARNING: Contains graphic elements.

Reaching its long black arm into quiet farmlands and fall-colored mountains, Highway 62 long provided the only link between Lincoln, Prairie Grove, and Rogers—three rural communities that dot the 150-mile route east of the Oklahoma border in northern Arkansas.

That was before September, though, when two homosexual men in Rogers allegedly raped and killed 13-year-old Jesse Dirkhising, a Prairie Grove resident and Lincoln middle-school student. Now the three towns are forever connected in a depressing tale of small-town sin and media double standards.

The story began when Jesse accepted a weekend job from 38-year-old Davis Carpenter, an openly gay hair stylist at Regis Hair Salon who had just settled in Rogers after moving 26 times throughout the country.

Jesse, who lived in a small trailer with two siblings, his mother, and her third husband, leapt at the chance to earn a few extra dollars and escape for 30-mile weekend trips to Rogers. While in Rogers, he lodged in an apartment shared by Mr. Carpenter and his 22-year-old homosexual lover, Joshua Brown.

Jesse's mother, Tina Yates, said she had known Mr. Carpenter for seven years and had no qualms about letting Jesse stay with the homosexual couple. "I have a lot of gay friends," she said. "I never ever thought he [Carpenter] would hurt one of our own children."

Neither did Jesse's classmates at Lincoln Middle School, who say Jesse bragged about a new job with "his uncle." "He said he loved going to work," said 13-year-old Carol Trembly, whose father drove Jesse's school bus.

Police responding to a pre-dawn 911 call on Sunday, Sept. 26, discovered a much more harrowing situation. As a frantic Davis Carpenter led them to Jesse's limp, naked body, police noticed drug paraphernalia and duct tape lying nearby. Hours later, Joshua Brown confessed that he sneaked behind Jesse, bound and gagged the boy, and then sodomized him repeatedly as Mr. Carpenter watched and gave instructions. After taking a break to eat a sandwich at about 5 a.m., Mr.

tonville, are charged with capital murder and six counts of rape; authorities haven't set a trial date.

Despite local outrage, the national press was not so taken aback. For weeks, reporters ignored the Durkhising murder, prompting charges of bias. For at the same time that newspapers did not cover Jesse's case, they



"NEVER THOUGHT HE'D HURT ONE OF OUR OWN":
Davis Don Carpenter, above, and Joshua Macave Brown, right, face murder charges.

Brown discovered Jesse had stopped breathing. The boy died at the hospital. Police found chilling notes and diagrams illustrating the rape, allegedly written from Mr. Carpenter to Mr. Brown.

According to police reports, the notes referred to making "him" take "those pills" and telling "him" not to resist or he would continue to be sexually assaulted. "Even the police officers who have investigated homicide, shootings, and rape in the past were taken aback by what they saw," said Rogers Police Chief Tim Keck, calling the case one of "the most brutal" he has seen.

Mr. Carpenter and Mr. Brown, who are being held in Benton County Jail in Ben-



continued their year-long blitz on the Matthew Shepard case—a media fest that began last October when two heterosexual men beat to death the 21-year-old homosexual college student.

Following Mr. Shepard's murder, the Associated Press (AP) ran national news stories every day for a week with the words "openly gay student" prominently displayed in headlines. But Jesse's murder did not make the AP national wire, with the exception of one story appearing almost a month after the crime.

"If this were an openly gay boy assaulted to death by two heterosexual men, I don't think there would be any doubt this would be a national news story," said Tim Graham, director of media analysis for the Virginia-based Media Research Center (MRC). MRC research revealed that most major newspapers, national television networks, and news-magazines shunned the Dirkhising murder.

Why the neglect? "This story has the potential to short-circuit the current appeal of gay politics—which is to focus on gays as victims of violence, not as perpetrators," Mr. Graham explained.

Homosexual advocacy groups like the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) remained silent about the Dirkhising killing. "It's a horrible, brutal crime and we feel for the family and everyone else affected, but we're not sure

it would be our place to comment," HRC spokesman Wayne Besen told WORLD. "Their sexual orientation was irrelevant to that fact. It was two guys who did a horrible thing."

But earlier this year, HRC was unwilling to attribute Mr. Shepard's murder simply to two guys doing a horrible thing. HRC spokeswoman Kim Hill blamed Mr. Shepard's murder on "a climate of intolerance . . . fostered by religious political organizations such as the Family Research Council, Focus on the Family, and the Christian Coalition." The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation joined HRC in attacking Christians, calling a "Truth in Love" advertising campaign featuring testimonies from former homosexuals "meanspirited" and "deceptive." The Matthew Shepard case was an opportunity to be exploited; the Jesse Dirkhising case is a danger to be downplayed.

But at least some Arkansans wonder how this could have happened. "It's unlikely there

is just one victim," said Rogers resident Susan Nemeč, whose 12-year-old son often accompanied her to Dixieland Mall where Mr. Carpenter worked. She recalls the hair stylist as a "charming man" who changed his hair color every other week: "I never felt like he was a predator."

The son of another mall employee was more discerning. Sitting beside his father's cash register at one of the mall's food stations, a pale-faced 14-year-old boy quietly told of Mr. Carpenter's advances, requesting that his name be withheld.

"He kept telling me I needed a haircut and that he wouldn't charge," said the boy, who often delivered food to the hair salon. Asked why he didn't accept, the boy responded, "He seemed a little too friendly. I just had a weird feeling."

The tight-knit communities of Prairie Grove and Lincoln, populations 2,240 and 1,682, respectively, wish Jesse had had the same feeling.

A look at Jesse's world

by CANDI CUSHMAN

For the past nine years, 49-year-old Gary Trembly, a sports writer for *The Lincoln Leader* weekly newspaper, has doubled as school bus driver. Dressed in Wranglers, a plaid shirt, and green shades, Mr. Trembly faithfully stands beside bus No. 8 as children laden with books and band instruments tumble in.

"I'm the only bus driver most of these kids ever had," Mr. Trembly says proudly, pointing to a cluster of school photos posted beside the rearview mirror. Other than a plastic rose stuck conspicuously above Jesse's usual seat, all seems normal as children's laughter rises above the rattle-tattle of bus No. 8.

The 30-mile bus ride offers a glimpse into rural

Arkansas, Jesse's world. As children exit the bus in groups of three and four onto dusty roads lined by chicken huts and cow pastures, Mr. Trembly describes their social structure as one divided between "the preppies and the skanks."

"The preppies are the teachers' kids who always get selected to play in ball games and wear bows in their heads," says Mr. Trembly. "Whereas some of the others you might check for head lice."

Jesse fell somewhere in the middle, he says—well liked by most but also avoided by some. "I think he really would have liked to be a good kid," says Mr. Trembly, his eyes watering just a little as he looks straight ahead. "But he just kind of got involved with the wrong bunch, maybe because they accepted him more."

Halfway along the 60-mile drive from Lincoln to Rogers, Mr. Trembly enters Prairie Grove and pulls off onto a gravel road known as "Greasy Valley Road." Barbed wire, rusty car parts, and sad-looking squashed pumpkins decorate the front lawn of the metal trailer that Mr. Trembly identifies as Jesse's.

During the 30-minute ride back to school, Mr. Trembly muses for a moment on the effects of a growing drug problem and teenage pregnancy rate on community youth—and the tendency of some adults to ignore that reality.

"Communities in this area sometimes color sin. They shade it so that it's not quite black," he said. "Unless something horrendous like this happens, and then they don't want to shade it at all." ☉

