



Room&Board HOME FURNISHINGS



Find your style at roomandboard.com

search

Go 4:58 AM PST, March 1, 2007

JOB'S CARS REAL ESTATE APARTMENTS SHOPPING | WEATHER TRAFFIC



west

Print E-mail story Most e-mailed Change text size

The secret life of Cory Kennedy

A photogenic teenager becomes an Internet celebrity and international style phenomenon before she's even 16. What's a mother to do?

By Shawn Hubler, Shawn Hubler is a senior writer for West. February 25, 2007



PHOTO GALLERY Cory Kennedy

Related

- Cory Kennedy's personal blog
- Cory Kennedy's MySpace page
- Mark Hunter's website
- YouTube video of Cory listening to a Good Charlotte song on her iPod

In the summer of 2005, when she was 15 but not yet famous, Cory Kennedy went to a Blood Brothers concert at the El Rey Theatre. She remembers what she was wearing—black leg warmers, beat-up black Converse sneakers and a canary-yellow Lacoste mini-dress that she'd had to beg her mother to buy her. It was "back in the day," at the end of ninth grade, when she was still going by her full name, Cory Kennedy-Levin. She was going to a lot of concerts then, and at this one, a guy named the Cobra Snake saw her and took her picture for his hipster-party photo website.

In the non-Internet world, the guy's real name is Mark Hunter, and the scary nickname was mostly wishful thinking. Bright, friendly and energetic, Hunter was also young. A year or two's difference, and Cory might have recognized him as the 2003 Associated Student Body vice president at Santa Monica High School. After graduation, he had discovered a knack for taking pictures of L.A. nightlife, and he had been posting them for free on thecobrasnake.com, which was becoming a fairly popular website. Hunter, then 20, especially liked the El Rey because all sorts of interesting people went there, from movie stars to posesses of L.A. teenagers like the pretty girl in yellow he saw that night out

on the town.

That was how it started. That was the first flicker of what would become the—What? Phenomenon? Moment? Cautionary tale? Success story? Footnote?—of Cory Kennedy.

If it's hard to characterize, it may be because hers is a dispatch from uncharted cultural waters. Never before have media, technology and celebrity collided with adolescence at such warp speed. Never before has it been so easy for, say, a middle-class kid with a curfew and no driver's license to rise to international fame almost without her parents' knowledge.

Put it this way: By the time Cory Kennedy's mother realized that her child had become, in the words of Gawker.com, an "Internet It Girl," the Web was riddled with photos of Cory posing, eating, dancing, shopping, romping at the beach, looking pensive and French-kissing one of the (adult) members of the rock band the Kings of Leon. She had European fan sites. She had thousands of people signing on to her MySpace pages. She had fashion bloggers dissecting her wardrobe ("a cross between the Little Match Girl and the quintessence of heroin chic," one wag called her taste in fashion). She had people watchers from the Netherlands to Japan speculating about her life story. (Was she a junkie? A refugee from Hyannis Port?) She had designers begging her to wear their clothes and deejays offering her money to show up at their nightclubs. She had invitations to party with Paris Hilton and Lindsay Lohan.

She was living, in short, a teenager's dream and a parent's version of "Fear Factor." And the obvious questions—at least for her mother—were, "What happened? And how?"

"I still have no idea," half-jokes Jinx Kennedy, a rangy 56-year-old who, with husband Barry Levin, 63, runs a for-profit high school degree program. We're in her Santa Monica living room, a cozy space filled with overstuffed sofas and framed family photos. In the kitchen, a white board above the microwave reminds the Kennedy-Levin children to "do chores" and "make bed" and "return your breakfast tray to the

HOME MyLATimes New Site Map

West Magazine

NEWS California | Local National World Entertainment News Business Sports Politics Opinion Columnists Print Edition

Calendarlive Travel New West Magazine House & Garden Health Food L.A. Wheels Obituaries Crossword, Sudoku All Sections Corrections

BUY, SELL & MORE Jobs Cars Real Estate Apartments Personals Deals at Local Stores Coupons Newspaper Ads

PLACE AN AD Media Kit

MEMBER SERVICES Log Out Help Contact Us L.A. Times Archives Customized News E-mail Newsletters

HOME DELIVERY Customer Support Subscribe to L.A. Times

advertisement

LOW AUTO INSURANCE RATES JUST GOT LOWER.

You could save up to **\$559!**

Visit **AAA.com**

More West News

- At the Palace Hotel
- The Bite of the Print
- Little Miss Rehab

Most Viewed Most E-mailed Related News

- Influential historian, intellectual and aide to President Kennedy
- Lasorda denies sex reports
- Lawyer accuses madam of defaming Lasorda
- Colorado to use inmates to fill migrant shortage
- This repo man drives off with ocean freighters

All most viewed >

advertisement

\$510,000 Mortgage for Under \$1,698/Mo!

Think You Pay Too Much for Your Mortgage? Find Out!

Calculate New Payment

Click Your State
Alabama

Click Your Rate
3.00% - 3.99%

Click Credit Type

kitchen." Sports schedules hang on the refrigerator next to the straight-A report card of Cory's youngest sister. The It Girl, her mother says, is in her room, enjoying her last hours of freedom before heading off to her new school.

"I didn't connect the dots," she says, sighing. "But I'm real connected now."

It's hard to overstate the speed with which the Internet can now make someone a cultural icon. A YouTube video, a flub on "American Idol," a stupid pet trick—virtually anything can become a fast track to celebrity. What that means is still working itself out; all that's clear is that it's become unbelievably easy to get and leverage attention. A nobody can become a somebody at a moment's notice, just because everybody is always watching everything.

Cory Kennedy became famous after the people who watched Hunter started watching her too. It was the late autumn of her sophomore year at Santa Monica High School. They had exchanged numbers that night at the El Rey. Hunter needed office help, and soon Cory and her best friend, Maggy Rogow—a senior at a private school that made "internships" a prerequisite for graduation—were doing after-school clerical work for Hunter two days a week.

Almost immediately, they wanted to tag along to the parties. Hunter had long taken female friends with him, but the friends were usually his age. True, there were times when Hunter himself was the most lifelike thing on the guest list. ("He makes it look like the best party in the whole wide world when it could be the worst one," Cory says, laughing.) But the events he shot were populated by hipsters in their 20s and 30s; sex, drugs and alcohol were like occupational hazards. When he finally succumbed to the interns' pleas, he was careful to get parental permission. (Jinx Kennedy confirms that his conscientiousness won her over.)

"It was kind of weird bringing underage people to the events," says Hunter, who gave them cameras and posted their work alongside his photos. "But they were part of the team."

Rogow, who is now a freshman at Hampshire College in Amherst, Mass., says the experience was intensely exciting. "We were the youngest people there, and we thought everyone was really cool," she remembers. Celebrities would show up—Adam Brody of "The OC," the female rock group the Like, those Kings of Leon—but the scene typically "came off a lot more wild than it was."

For Cory, however, the experience was life-altering. From the moment Hunter posted his first pictures of her, with her doe eyes and her brown hair asunder, it was clear that her childlike face, surrounded by all that L.A.-noir, had its own gravitational pull. Some of it may have been his presentation: One set of photos, posted in December 2005 under the cryptic title "JFK CORY KENNEDY," encouraged speculation that she came from the political family. The allure, too, might have been thecobrasnake.com, which was getting more than 10,000 unique visitors a day, a following of kids, scenesters, professional trend-spotters and celebrity gawkers that, in the next year, would more than double.

But mostly the reaction was simply to 15-year-old Cory as seen through the love-struck eyes of a 20-year-old who couldn't stop looking at her. "She was totally real," Hunter says, "and totally innocent."

Of course, no muse is ever quite that simple. Cory, for example, has three sisters: 15-year-old Cody, 13-year-old Chandler, and Chris, who is her twin. Jinx Kennedy says her oldest girls' personalities were clear from the beginning: Chris "was just a typical, goofy, nice—really nice—kid," and Cory was the one with the plan and the determination. Chris loved art and Cory loved fashion. If both were also a little unconventional, it made sense: Before their parents' diploma business (which promises "diplomas in one week or less" on its website), Jinx had a love of the theater—her mother, she says, named her after Jinx Falkenburg, the model—and Barry Levin says he had worked for more than 20 years in the fashion industry.

Once, when Cory was 5, Jinx says, she noticed a fancy dress at Macy's. "Ooh! Pitty dress!" Cory cried. But when her mother saw what it cost, she hid it. "And do you know, she pawed through all the clothes on that rack until she found it? 'Nooo! I want the pitty dress!'"

The family, she says, lived in West Hollywood and Manhattan Beach before moving to Santa Monica in 2000, where they enrolled the kids in public schools. All was more or less calm until the twins hit adolescence. Then, Jinx says, Chris fell in with a fast crowd and began having behavioral problems. Cory's friends were more sheltered, but by the start of her sophomore year, Cory, too, seemed lonely and anxious. Jinx was alarmed; her family, she says, had a genetic predisposition to depression. Though Cory says she has never smoked pot, let alone tried hard drugs, the Kennedy-Levins didn't take any chances. They signed up both twins for therapy and weekly drug tests.

Cory remembers the period without resentment. "I was just struggling all around," she

Good

© 2006 LowerMyBills, Inc.

LowerMyBills.com

apartments.com™
more under one roof

apartments.com commonly
helping people find
apartments in all
50 states.
(even the small ones)

- Enter City -

- Select a State -

- Enter Zip -

clickhere

recalls, adding that she'd had bouts of sadness as far back as fourth grade. Nor did it help that her social circle was populated with some of the most privileged and pressured adolescents in Southern California. "I was with great people, but I've always felt like I needed to do something more for myself, to be, like, five steps ahead of the game."

Finally, Cory says, she left school and stayed home for two weeks. She wasn't drinking or doing drugs, she says. She was "just sad." Eventually, her mother enrolled her in a monthlong, in-patient UCLA program to treat depression. "We had Halloween there and it was really weird, because we had to go trick-or-treating in the hospital," Cory remembers. When she was discharged, she says, she opted to do her classwork via independent study rather than risk a relapse by returning in the middle of the school year.

This, Jinx Kennedy says, was why she was optimistic when her daughter announced that she was going to augment her independent study with an internship at a photography business. "We were just glad that she was happy," Jinx says. And when it became apparent that the almost-21-year-old photographer was dating her not-quite-16-year-old daughter, she says, she insisted that the couple spend their time together at the Kennedy-Levin home, where she could watch them.

"I said, 'Mark, I love you dearly and I'd hate to put you in jail, but I'd do it in a New York minute,'" she remembers. In truth, though, she and her husband felt that Hunter was good for their daughter: "I thought she would be protected because Mark is a great guy."

First came the photos: Cory eating. Cory bicycling. Cory posing next to a brick wall. Cory on the sand. Cory at a party. Cory unaware that her picture was being taken. Cory trying to look grown-up, smoking a cigarette, holding a beer.

"I can't take my eyes off of her. She's got something that intrigues me," marveled a blogger in February at fashionologie.com. The response was instantaneous: "Who is she?" . . . "No one famous, just a girl from California . . ." . . . She's kind of famous here at the ElleGirl-forum in Holland . . . "I go to school with her . . ."

Then came the numbers. Hunter is assiduous about tracking use of his website, and he noticed that every time he'd run a picture of Cory, "I'd start seeing all this traffic from fashion community sites."

The next step seemed obvious, says Cory: "I thought, 'Hmm. This could maybe go somewhere.'"

Hunter says he already had a modest network of fashion industry connections, and he knew that leveraging Cory's popularity would raise his profile. Demand for her as, say, a model, meant demand for him as her gatekeeper and photographer. "I'm not a superstar. But if I can create a superstar," he remembers thinking, "it'll be good for my career, for her career, for all of us."

By now it was the beginning of April, about 3 months after Cory's first day as an intern. Cory's family was going to New York for a spring-break vacation; Hunter met them there and, on a free afternoon, took Cory to meet a friend of his who is the editor in chief of Nylon, a national fashion and cultural magazine. "We were doing our music-MySpace issue and looking for real girls to be in that story and immediately liked her," says Marvin Scott Jarrett, who asked Cory to come back for a photo shoot the next day.

Jinx Kennedy had never heard of Nylon. She says she just thought Cory's boyfriend was taking her to meet one of his buddies. But she does recall being surprised at the number of New Yorkers who seemed to know her daughter.

"People were running up to us going, 'Cory! Hey, Cory!'" she remembers. "We were at that restaurant Pastis, and a kid named DeeJam? DJ AM? A deejay? came up to her and started talking. I thought, 'Gee, Cory knows people all over. How nice!'"

Jinx's friends tried to educate her. One in particular mentioned Cory repeatedly. "She'd say, 'Are you keeping a close watch on Cory? 'Cause she's getting her picture all over the Internet.' I'd say, 'Oh, it's just that Mark is shooting her and he's smitten.' And she'd say, 'You should get into her MySpace, because I think this is really big.'"

But, Jinx says, she had neither the will nor the computer savvy to imagine what might be happening in the alternative universe of Cory's online persona. And, in any case, such things seemed trivial compared with her concerns for her child's emotional and psychological health.

It wasn't until the June issue of Nylon hit the newsstands that she realized her daughter was being swept up into something bigger. The New York Times ran an article on interns and mentioned Cory's relationship with Hunter. The LA Weekly did a short piece, calling Cory a "club urchin." Real-world recognition fed online demand. By

fall, one of the hottest things on the Web was a video of Cory eating Indian food while rocking out to a Good Charlotte song on an iPod—the creation of Nylon's Jarrett, who had been hired to direct some of the band's rock videos as a sideline.

"Cory kept telling me she was a big deal," Jinx recalls. "She'd say, 'Mom, you don't know how big I'm getting.' I'd say, 'Don't get too big for your britches.' She'd say, 'I'm famous.' And I'd say, 'You're a child.'"

The breaking point came with the start of a new school year. Cory was still doing independent study, having convinced her parents that, though her "internship" was over, she needed flexibility to pursue her budding fashion career. Her arguments weren't outlandish, notes her father, who remembers the hard work and long hours of his own years in fashion. "And she's so mature for her age," he says, and she did seem to be in demand.

She had a blog now and a column in Nylon. And, she says, she was being paid \$100 or more a night by high-profile L.A. clubs such as LAX and Teddy's to show up with her friends (an arrangement that apparently required a certain amount of nodding and winking, given that she was only 16).

But as the weeks passed, Cory's hours became later, Jinx says, and for the first time she began to worry. Cory and Hunter had broken up—fame had, indeed, increased demand for his work—and he traveled a lot. Cory insisted that to capitalize on her newfound fame, she had to go out without him, on weeknights as well as weekends. "She'd say Tuesdays and Thursdays are when the glamour people go out," her mother says, "that Saturday and Sunday are for tourists."

Nor did it help that now real celebrities wanted to meet her. "Cory would say, 'I'm going to Paris' party,' and I was, 'Oh, honey, no. She's 25!'" Jinx says. "She'd say, 'Lindsay Lohan wants to meet me at the Chateau Marmont.' And I'd say, 'Yeah, right.' But then I'd drive her up there, and there she was in a trench coat—Lindsay Lohan!"

Cory's blog gives a hint of the direction she was headed: "I'm home from Paris Hilton's house" . . . "talked to Sean Lennon today about hosting the Nylon Halloween party" . . . "Vincent Gallo tried to hook up with me . . ."

Meanwhile, Jinx says, people were approaching her at the hairdresser and in restaurants, asking whether it was true, say, that Ashanti was mad at her daughter or that Cory was on the outs with the Olsen twins. ("My mom was like, 'Cory, are you being mean to the twins?'" Cory recalls, laughing.)

She tried grounding Cory. When that seemed too punitive, she tried hiring her a driver, which didn't work either. "I would call her an annoying five or six times a night," Jinx says. "'Where are you? What's going on? It's 2 in the morning. This is out of control.'"

We are in Cory Kennedy's bedroom. Present are Cory, Hunter, this reporter and Nate Van Dusen, a filmmaker who is featuring Cory in a new documentary. It's one of those media-age moments: a documentarian filming a photographer shooting a journalist interviewing a teenager. Not to mention the scene in the kitchen, where Cory's middle sister, an aspiring actress, is entertaining Nick Simmons, her new boyfriend, the son of Kiss' Gene Simmons and a rising star of reality TV.

Van Dusen, who is 27, is focusing on how kids under 21 are directly influencing culture. His goal is to finish his project in time to submit it to the next Sundance Film Festival. He's interested in Cory's impact on teenage fashion, which at the moment is significant. This month her picture is in at least four glossy magazines.

"Cory, is it AT ALL possible you could tell me where you got those shades?" fans write on her MySpace page, which, at last count, had 3,700 "friends" listed. Young girls ask how she gets her hair into its signature cascade of unkemptness. They study her photos and copy her shoes, her headbands, even the little red dot of broken capillaries under her right eye.

"Best outfit . . . EVER!!!" one gushes. Waxes another: "I heart your moonboots."

Cory finds this both understandable and amusing. "I do dress differently," she says. "I would probably look at Cory Kennedy if I didn't know her." Fans compare her to Liv Tyler and Fiona Apple, though she mostly just looks like a charming and unusually un-self-conscious teenager. She is all hair and legs. Her laugh is a daffy "yuk-yuk." She's in blue-and-orange short-shorts, an Oxford-cloth blouse and a clump of tangled necklaces. She has a cowboy boot on one foot and a dirty white anklet on the other.

And it is, in fact, hard to stop looking at her, not so much because she is so lovely but because she is so transparent. "It's like an Ingredient X, and some people have it and some people don't," is how Nylon's Jarrett explains it. She seems almost oblivious to the camera. She had boasted, in a prior conversation, that her mother was once in show business. "She still gets residuals and stuff, which is so cool," she'd said. "I hope I get residuals someday too."

When asked what, in this room, reminds her of herself, she points to a pile of CDs (Cream, the Doors, Nirvana) and a shelf heaped with books on Richard Avedon and Andy Warhol.

"These are my favorite pants," she says, brandishing a fistful of ragged black Levi's. "There were these boys? And one was a tagger? And they went graffiti-ing all night, like every night? And I go, 'Can I borrow your pants?' And then I never. Gave them. Back. They're so priceless. Like, they're like a piece of art."

Just then her mother peeks through the doorway. Cory shoots her an impatient look. I notice that the sheets on Cory's single bed are hot pink.

"They're not my preference," Cory replies, rolling her eyes. "I'd have all white. If I ever had a bed of my own."

This isn't her bed?

"It's my bed," she grouses. "But it isn't my house."

It isn't?

Well, all right, it is. But at the moment she's technically sleeping at her new school. "Don't say it's a boarding school, say it's a regular school because I don't want people to start rumors like, 'Oh, she went to, like, Utah.' Like I'm one of those kids."

What happened, Cory says, is that her mother overreacted. What happened, her mother says, is that she finally managed to pull her child back from the vortex. In any case, it was a year after her daughter's adventures as an Internet icon began.

An opening arose at the Los Angeles school where Cory's twin sister had lived for the past year, a nonpublic therapeutic placement for kids with various types of learning, behavioral and emotional problems; a conversation with the therapists convinced Jinx Kennedy that a stint there also would benefit Cory.

Phone use is restricted. So are computers. Cory can come home on weekends and go out for short work assignments—say, photo shoots—with parental supervision, but otherwise she has to stay in her room on school nights.

"I've been asked to go back and, like, change my clothes. And brush my hair," Cory says, groaning. "It's one of my, like, goals to come to school looking clean. And that's not happening. Because that's just not how I roll."

Her mother is firm: "I say, 'If you play it right and follow the rules, you'll be back home soon. . . . If you're famous now, you'll still be famous then.'"

Meanwhile, the Web waits. "Whhhhhhhhere is misscorykennedy?" mourned a recent post on MySpace.

"Status: Away," she blogged as January ended and February arrived with her 17th birthday. "brb.....finding myself."

How to Be Famous —Fast

June 2005: Fifteen-year-old Cory Kennedy, wearing a coveted yellow mini-dress, goes to see the Blood Brothers at the El Rey Theatre. Gets noticed by photographer Mark Hunter, the Cobra Snake.

January 2006: Hunter posts photo of Cory smooching with one of the Kings of Leon. Cory becomes Hunter's girlfriend. More parties, more pictures. Mom insists Cory and Hunter spend more time at her house, where she can keep an eye on them.

February 2006: Cory turns 16; fans of thecobrasnake.com, reacting to photos of Cory on the website, wonder who she is. A fashion blogger calls her a "gem" and marvels, "I can't take my eyes off of her." A reader responds by directing the blogger to an all-Cory fan site developed by someone in the Netherlands.

March 2006: Hunter notices that his Web traffic jumps every time Cory's picture is posted. They decide to make her a fashion star.

April 2006: Cory visits New York with her parents. Hunter meets her there and they visit the editor of Nylon magazine, who asks her to come back to have her picture taken. Her parents are happy she's happy, but have no idea what Nylon magazine is.

June 2006: Nylon publishes a full page of Cory photos. At Urban Outfitters in Westwood, people gape at her as if she's a star. Internet chatter intensifies.

July 2006: The New York Times mentions Cory in an article on interns. Her mother

wonders whether Cory as Internet celebrity is bigger than she'd realized.

August 2006: Fans hack Cory's MySpace page. She starts a new one and launches a blog. By month's end, typical items include an account of a P. Diddy party.

September 2006: A video of Cory listening to a Good Charlotte song becomes a cult favorite on YouTube. She and Hunter split, and she starts staying out late with celebrities. Her parents become alarmed.

MORE NEWS

- Jitters still roil Asian financial markets
- Iran indicates it will join Iraq conference
- Turmoil in Senate's anti-terrorism debate
- Dodgers icon Lasorda denies sex reports



What's the real beauty of "Southern California"? View our readers' photos and share your own at [Your Scene](#).

[Submit your photo now >>](#)

Ads by Google

Inclusive Manatee Swim

All day Manatee Snorkel Tour aboard custom houseboat. 2 to 6 persons.
www.manateeswimtours.com

Woman Adventure Vacation

8 days all inclusive retreat in Costa Rica. Get a life lift!
RetreatsCostaRica.com

Cheap Caribbean

All-Inclusive Caribbean Vacations. Book Online and Get 35% Off.
www.cheapcaribbean.com

Costa Rica Honeymoon

Costa Rica Honeymoon Specialist Romantic Honeymoon from \$2320 pp
www.costaricadreamin.com

Effortless Vacations

Care-free luxury vacations, villas Let us manage your vacation for you
www.EffortlessVacations.com

PARTNERS:



Copyright 2007 Los Angeles Times | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Jobs](#) | [Permissions](#) | [Contact](#)