In MySpace suicide case, community fights back

After a teen girl falls victim to a Web hoax, angry neighbors take matters into their own hands.

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DARDENNE PRAIRIE, MO. -- For nearly a year, the families who live along Waterford Crystal Drive in this bedroom community northwest of St. Louis have kept the secret about the boy Megan Meier met last September on the social networking site MySpace.

He called himself Josh Evans, and he and 13-year-old Megan struck up an online friendship that lasted several weeks. Then the boy abruptly turned on Megan and ended it. That night, Megan, who had previously battled depression, committed suicide.

The secret was revealed six weeks later: Neighbor Lori Drew had pretended to be 16-year-old Josh to gain the trust of Megan, who had been fighting with Drew's daughter, according to sheriff's department records and Megan's parents.

After their daughter's death, Tina and Ron Meier begged their other neighbors to keep the story private. Let the local authorities and the FBI conduct their investigations in privacy, they pleaded.

But after waiting for criminal charges to be filed against Drew, neighbors learned that local and federal prosecutors could not find a statute applicable to the case.

This community's patience has dried up. The furious neighbors -- and in the wake of recent media reports, an outraged public -- are taking matters into their own hands.

Dozens of people allegedly have called local businesses that work with the Drews' advertising booklet firm, and flooded the phone lines this week at the local Burlington Coat Factory, where Curt Drew reportedly works.

"I posted that, where Curt works. I'm not ashamed to admit that," said Trever Buckles, 40, a neighbor whose two teenage boys grew up with Megan. "Why? Because there's never been any sense of remorse or public apology from the Drews, no 'maybe we made a mistake.' "

Local teenagers and residents protest just steps from the Drews' tiny porch. A fake 911 call, claiming a man had been shot inside the Drew home, sent law enforcement officers to surround the one-story, white-sided house. People drive through the neighborhood in the middle of the
night, screaming, "Murderer!"

The Drews, who have mounted cameras and recording devices onto the roof of their house to track the movements of their neighbors, declined to comment for this article.

Cyber-bullying has become an increasingly creepy reality, where the anonymity of video games, message boards and other online forums offers an outlet for cruel taunts. But it can be difficult to draw the line between constitutionally protected free speech and conduct that is illegal.

Still, Parry Aftab, an Internet privacy lawyer and executive director of WiredSafety.org, points to one federal statute that may apply in the Meier case: the telecommunications harassment law. Amended in 2005, the law prohibits people from anonymously using the Internet with the intent to annoy, abuse, threaten or harass another person.

Terri Dougherty, a spokeswoman for the U.S. attorney's office in St. Louis, declined to comment on whether prosecutors could apply the federal statute in the Meier case.

The mounting tension and heated emotions have local community leaders worried. The St. Charles County Sheriff's Department, which had rarely visited the suburb, now regularly patrols there. County prosecutors are reexamining the case.

On Wednesday evening, Dardenne Prairie's Board of Aldermen unanimously passed a law that makes cyber-harassment a misdemeanor - with a maximum penalty of 90 days in jail, $500 fine or both for each violation. It's the most stringent punishment available to the city.

"We're all in shock," said Mayor Pam Fogarty. "If I have anything to say about it, we'll never have our hands tied legally like this again."

Dardenne Prairie is an upper-middle-class enclave of about 7,400 people, about 35 miles northwest of St. Louis. Over the years, the flat expanse of farmland has been taken over by sprawling subdivisions, high-end bistros and strip-mall cafes.

The Meiers moved to the east side of town 13 years ago, where clusters of maple trees and prairie grasses still remain relatively undeveloped. Eager for more space at a budget price, the couple were drawn by numerous families and safe streets with names like Swan Lake Drive and Tri Sports Drive.

"There were kids everywhere, and they've all grown up together," said Tina Meier, 37, who works in real estate. "They ride their bikes together, have barbecues together, go on family vacations together, go to school together."

Megan befriended Lori and Curt Drew's daughter in elementary school, and the two became close, Meier said. When Megan transferred to a different middle school last fall, in an effort to help her deal with depression and get away from some bullies, the girls grew apart, her parents said. The Meiers declined to discuss the details behind the girls' estrangement.

Around the same time, Megan started to use the Internet, under the supervision of her parents. Sitting on the family's brown floral couch with her father, or nestled next to her mother in the family's office in the basement, the eighth-grader browsed through her friends' websites and chatted about school.

When a boy messaged Megan on MySpace and asked to be her friend, she excitedly agreed. The two talked online for about six weeks, her parents said.

On Oct. 16, Josh told Megan he'd heard that she was a terrible friend. The
two fought. Tina, who had to leave to take Megan's younger sister, Allison, to a doctor's appointment, ordered Megan to get off the computer.

She didn't. The messages grew nasty, according to an FBI transcript.

The final message isn't included in the transcript: "I remember it said something like, 'The world would be a better-off place without you,' " said Ron Meier, 37, who works as a machinist.

That evening, as her parents were downstairs preparing for dinner, Megan hanged herself in her closet. She died the next day.

In the weeks that followed, the Drews comforted the Meiers. They said nothing to them about the fake MySpace account.

They prayed at the wake and consoled sobbing community members at Megan's funeral. They invited the Meiers to birthday parties and had Allison over to bake holiday cookies. They asked the Meiers to hide Christmas gifts in their garage, away from their own children's prying eyes.

It was last Thanksgiving weekend when the Meiers said they learned the truth from a neighbor who had figured out that Lori Drew had devised the online relationship with Megan. In a fit of rage, they hacked up one of the gifts they were storing -- a Foosball table -- with an ax and sledgehammer. Tina and Ronald dumped the pieces onto the Drews' driveway.

"I heard this god-awful screaming," said neighbor Kristie Kriss, 48. "It was Tina. When I heard what happened, I couldn't believe it."

When the Drews complained to the authorities about the loss of their Foosball table, the story became public. According to a sheriff's department report, Lori Drew said "she wanted to 'just tell them' what she did to contribute to the Meiers' daughter's suicide." Drew told the officer that she, with the help of a temporary employee, "instigated and monitored" a fake profile prior to Megan's suicide, "for the sole purpose of communicating" with the girl.

"Drew stated that she, her daughter and [the employee] all typed, read and monitored the communication between the fake male profile and Megan," the report said.

Drew then told the officer that the account had been accessed by other people, "and Megan found out she had been duped."

The Meiers hired an attorney.

"We told our friends to trust the system, and we would have our justice," said Ron Meier.

The neighborhood may have agreed to stay mum, but they couldn't keep their feelings hidden: Many people here say they shunned the Drews, meeting their gaze with sneers and obscene gestures.

On the anniversary of Megan's death, Ron's relatives lined the street with black-and-white polka-dot balloons and put up signs around the neighborhood that asked for "justice for Megan."

Meanwhile, the Meiers' marriage fell apart. Tina moved out of the house in the spring and now lives with her mother. The couple is getting divorced. Allison, now 11, splits her time between the two.

Ron has remained in the house on Waterford Crystal Drive, and has tried to preserve Megan's room. Her clothes fill the closet. But he's stopped sleeping at the house.

His attorney has suggested that he spend the nights with friends or family, because "if something does happen to the Drews, I'm going to be the No. 1 suspect and I'll need a witness to prove my innocence," Ron said.
"All we feel is frustration, anger," neighbor Kriss said. "For months, we've been asking ourselves, 'What mother in her right mind would do this? And why won't the cops do anything to punish them?"

"We just want them gone."

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Times researcher DeeDee Correll in Denver contributed to this report.