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Woman Who Posed as Boy Testifies in Case That Ended in Suicide of 13-Year-Old

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Lori Drew, photo at left, is on trial for fraud in a case that resulted in the death of Megan Meier, 13. Christina Meier, in a dress at right, is the mother of Megan, who committed suicide after an exchange of e-mail messages over a fake account on MySpace.

By JENNIFER STEINHAUER Published: November 20, 2008

LOS ANGELES — Slumping forward miserably in the witness box, in barely audible tones, a young woman told a federal jury here on Thursday that she had posed as a teenage boy in a series of e-mail messages to a 13-year-old girl that ended in the girl's expressing suicidal thoughts and hanging herself.

"You're the kind of boy a girl would kill herself over," the woman, Ashley Grills, said the 13-year-old girl, Megan Meier, wrote before taking her own life.

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Testifying under an immunity agreement with federal prosecutors, Ms. Grills, 20, described how she came up with the idea to create a fake MySpace account with the identity of a cute teenage boy. The goal, she said, was to draw in Megan and learn about her and things she might have been saying about the teenage daughter of Ms. Grills's friend and employer, Lori Drew.

Ms. Drew, who lives in a suburb of St. Louis and was a neighbor of the Meiers, is

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charged with conspiracy and three counts of accessing a computer without authorization via interstate commerce to obtain information to inflict emotional distress.

Legal experts believe the trial is an unprecedented use of computer fraud statutes to prosecute a case involving how people use a social networking site. [Thomas O'Brien](#), the United States attorney here, asserted jurisdiction over a matter that local prosecutors in Missouri chose not to pursue — successfully arguing that he had jurisdiction because MySpace is based in Los Angeles, where its servers are housed.

In her testimony on the second day of Ms. Drew's trial, Ms. Grills described how Ms. Drew had become angry with Megan for "spreading lies" about Ms. Drew's daughter Sarah, and was eager to "expose" her. Ms. Grills, who worked at the Drew home, said she hatched the idea of creating a phony MySpace account, under the name Josh Evans, to communicate with Megan.

The original idea, Ms. Grills said, was to lure Megan to make nasty remarks about Sarah, which she and Ms. Drew would then present to Megan's mother. But the idea morphed into other methods of humiliating the girl — devised by Ms. Drew, she said.

Ms. Grills said that she had expressed trepidation about creating a fake account, but that Ms. Drew had told her "that it was fine and that people do it all the time." She added, "She was like a second mother to me, and I didn't think she would do anything to get me in trouble."

Things went awry, Ms. Grills said, after she sent an e-mail message with Ms. Drew's blessing that said, "The world would be a better place without you." It was an attempt, she said, to get Megan to stop communicating with the made-up Josh so the ruse could end.

Megan's response, the message about suicide, had never been revealed by Ms. Grills until this week. Shortly after sending the message, Megan hanged herself on Oct. 16, 2006.

"It was something I didn't want to remember," said Ms. Grills, who said she had been hospitalized for depression after the suicide. "I pushed it out of my mind."

As Ms. Grills told her story, Megan's father, Ronald Meier, listened from the front row of the courtroom, rocking slightly and furiously dabbing at his eyes.


Ms. Drew's defense lawyer, Dean Steward, carefully tried to unravel the credibility of Ms. Grills and others witnesses, including Megan's mother, Christina Meier, whose testimony continued from Wednesday.

"Don't you kind of have to say stuff they want to hear?" he said to Ms. Grills, motioning to prosecutors in a reference to her immunity agreement.

Mr. Steward suggested that Ms. Meier ought to have known better than to leave her daughter alone in her room after a nasty exchange of e-mail banter left the girl distraught. He said the antidepressant drugs her daughter had been taking were known to cause suicidal thoughts in teenagers.

"You let her run upstairs to the room alone," Mr. Steward said to Ms. Meier.

The trial has also included testimony about the fallout for Ms. Drew after the case became public. A hairdresser testified about the irate phone calls her salon received for continuing to tend to the hair care of Ms. Drew, and an interior designer detailed both how she sold Ms. Drew blinds to block the hostile approaches of neighbors, while being



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hected herself for continuing to advertise her business in a coupon book distributed by Ms. Drew.

Mr. O'Brien, the United States attorney, made the highly unusual choice to prosecute the case himself, punctuating his personal interest in the matter.

Should he succeed in convicting Ms. Drew, the case, while derided by critics as an overreach, would almost certainly be a game changer in the still-evolving world of social networking.

By essentially equating the violation of usage agreements with computer hacking into a computer, a guilty verdict in this case could have widespread implications for future prosecutions under the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act, said Matthew Levine, a former federal prosecutor. Each of the three counts against Ms. Drew carries a maximum sentence of five years in prison.

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