A Deadly Web of Deceit
A Teen's Online 'Friend' Proved False, And Cyber-Vigilantes Are Avenging Her

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DARDENNE PRAIRIE, Mo.

Megan Meier was buried in the polka-dot dress she planned to wear for her 14th birthday. She had handed out the invitations to her party the day she died. Her eighth-grade classmates attended her funeral, instead, heads bowed and hands clasped as her casket was loaded into the hearse.

At the time, Megan's suicide was considered a private tragedy in a quiet suburb tucked between strip malls a half-hour up the interstate from St. Louis. Concerned neighbors embraced her stunned family, and a collective grief seemed to envelop the look-alike houses on Waterford Crystal Drive.

A year passed before the truth began coming out.

In November, the grieving parents told their local newspaper that a 47-year-old neighbor -- a family friend -- had orchestrated a cruel prank on MySpace.com, driving Megan to loop a belt around her neck and hang herself in her bedroom closet. The troubling story was picked up by bloggers, talk radio and others in the indignant chat universe. Tens of thousands joined the ongoing debate. Some wanted legislation; others wanted blood.

On message boards and Web site memorials, in chats and forums, Megan would be mourned, analyzed, romanticized, vilified and endlessly discussed, giving her in death the popularity she never knew in life.

If the Internet had killed Megan Meier, now it would avenge her.

* * *

A handsome high school boy was flirting on MySpace.com. Josh Evans told Megan Meier she had pretty eyes, that he thought she was cute. Megan excitedly messaged back.

On the Internet, she could be cool. Thirteen had been miserable, but that fall Megan had fled the jeering hallways of West Middle School, and the outcast misery of a fat girl trying to fit in. Enrolled in a small parish school, she was reinventing herself: She had joined the volleyball team and lost 20 pounds. Her parents were relieved to hear Megan's bubbly laugh again. Fourteen promised to be better.

But in the course of two hours on a rainy Monday afternoon, Megan Meier suddenly became a target once more, hounded and publicly humiliated by a teenage mob on the Web, set upon in a virtual Lord of the
Cyberflies.

Her parents found her body at dinnertime.

When Ron Meier turned on the computer hours after his daughter died, he saw the last message she had received from her MySpace crush:

"This world would be a better place without you."

Weeks after Megan's suicide on Oct. 16, 2006, the Meiers discovered that "Josh" didn't exist. Lori Drew, her 13-year-old daughter and an 18-year-old family friend told investigators that "Josh" had been created to win Megan's trust and find out if she was spreading rumors about the Drew girl, a former classmate and friend. "Megan supposedly had called [her] a lesbian," Tina Meier says.

Authorities urged the neighbors to keep quiet while the FBI investigated. Months passed. A brick was thrown through the Drews' kitchen window; paintballs splattered against their sunroom. While the Drews were shoveling snow one day, Ron Meier had rolled down his truck window. "Who're you gonna kill today?" he shouted.

Ultimately, the U.S. attorney's office decided no charges could be filed against the Drews or the family friend, Ashley Grills, who told the FBI that Lori Drew would sometimes dictate messages for "Josh" to send Megan.

The St. Charles County prosecutor, Jack Banas, reached the same conclusion, explaining that no statutes against harassment, stalking or child endangerment could be applied here. What happened to Megan was despicable, he said, but for it to be considered criminal the state would have to prove that the hoax was intended to frighten or disturb Megan, not merely elicit information. The Los Angeles Times, citing an anonymous source, reported yesterday that federal prosecutors in California are investigating whether MySpace, which is based in Santa Monica, was defrauded by the perpetrators of the "Josh Evans" hoax.

"If Megan had taken her life with bullets and guns I had in the house, I'd be in jail," says her bitter father. "But they did it with a computer and are walking free."

When Ron and Tina Meier began speaking out for tougher laws against cyber-bullying, the tragedy immediately became a cause celebre. But the sophisticated powers of the information age and the frontier atmosphere of the World Wide Web were about to sideswipe each other again, set in motion this time by a housewife in Richmond.

Sarah Wells was an early convert who had enjoyed the raucous town-hall debates of the blogosphere for a few years already. Married to a lawyer, the 45-year-old blogger was dubious when a link to the newspaper story about Megan Meier popped up on her screen: This was so outrageous, it had to be an urban myth.

It was easy enough to find out for herself.

"I wanted to know who did this," Wells says. She found Megan's obituary online and looked up the Meiers' address in an online phonebook. The newspaper story revealing the hoax mentioned that Tina Meier was a Realtor who had sold the unnamed perpetrator a house four doors down just a few years ago. Wells found St. Charles County tax records online and searched homes purchased on Waterford Crystal Drive during that
period. The trail quickly led to Curt and Lori Drew. She then contacted a source she refuses to name, "someone in a position to know," and confirmed Lori Drew's name against a police report.

Wells posted the Drews' names and address on her blog. "I think there are a lot of reasons people would want to know," she explains. "There's the shaming and accountability side of things. And protection of the community: She could be doing this to other kids."

Overnight, Wells's blog ricocheted through cyberspace, and by morning, an online lynch mob had formed. Already pariahs in their own neighborhood, the Drews reportedly began getting death threats, harassing calls, and ugly e-mails and letters from the global village.

Cyber-sleuths combed public records online to post photos of Lori and Curt Drew along with heated messages demanding they be held accountable. Satellite images of the house were also posted, along with the Drews' address and phone numbers, and details about where each worked.

"Where do you search for vehicle records? My stalking arsenal needs some updating," one blogger asked others. "How about organizing a lot of folks to just stand in front of their house and stare? Subtle, but creepy, and perfectly legal," suggested another. Boycotts of businesses using Lori Drew's coupon-mailing service were organized and letter-writing campaigns launched to lawmakers, employers and even the chamber of commerce.

What lawmakers couldn't or wouldn't do, virtual vigilantes quickly did. Megan's tormentors were forced into hiding.

Although police reported that Lori Drew initially told them that she had "instigated and monitored" the fake MySpace profile, her lawyer recently changed her story.

"Lori Drew was not aware of any mean, nasty or negative comments made by anyone against Megan until after Megan took her own life," attorney James Briscoe said in a statement. He acknowledged, however, that his client did know about the fake account, and that Megan was being misled by her daughter and Grills. Grills, through an aunt, declined to comment.

"The MySpace account was in place for approximately 29 days. It is undisputed that all messages sent were positive until the last 24 hours," the lawyer's statement said. "The Drew family mourns the death of Megan every day."

The Meiers remain unswayed.

"You can't ask me to have compassion for the people who did this to my daughter," Tina Meier says. "Never, ever ever will I forgive them."

Even as new Web sites popped up to defend Megan, a more startling one materialized last month, it's very name proving just how ugly things had become: Meganhaditcoming.com.

The anonymous blogger claimed to be a former classmate of Megan's. She described Megan in vicious terms as an aggressive, vulgar and unpopular girl who victimized the Drew girl. More than 5,000 comments were posted within three days -- many of them denouncing the blog as "sick" and suggesting it was the work of the Drews. The final entry before the site was dismantled proclaimed, "I am Lori Drew."
The Drews' lawyer denied that the family had anything to do with the site, and the county prosecutor launched an investigation.

Trapped in the Internet's endless hall of mirrors, Lori Drew had become a hoax herself.

Meeting 'Josh'

The Meiers and Drews were once friends and the Drews even took Megan on vacation. They were aware she took medication for depression. Megan struggled with attention-deficit disorder and bouts of anxiety as well; she had been in counseling since third grade. Her mother once had to pick her up from school after she intentionally nicked a wrist, but Tina Meier denies that it was a suicide attempt or serious enough to require medical attention.

The Drews' 13-year-old also "had a hard time fitting in," recalls Michele Mulford, who lives across the street and has a daughter the same age. Soon after moving to the neighborhood, the Drews developed a reputation for being pushy parents who often intervened in little girl squabbles.

Apparently worried about her daughter being left on her own to fend off the junior high bullies, Lori tried to talk the Meiers out of enrolling Megan in private school, insisting "that it was a bad idea," Tina recalls.

When "Josh Evans" suddenly appeared on her MySpace page, Megan was thrilled by the attention of the supposed 16-year-old home-schooler who was new to town. Soon she told him she loved him.

Tina was suspicious from the outset. Megan had a private account; nobody who didn't already know her name could message her. Who was this boy?

Megan brushed aside her mother's questions. He had to know her, right? She just wasn't sure where she might have met him.

"Josh Evans" was hardly alone in the Web wilderness as a figment of someone's imagination. The Internet's unbridled freedom often breeds rampant fakery.

Megan and a friend had created a phony "hot" girl on MySpace the previous year; the Meiers had revoked Megan's computer privileges as a result. She had only recently earned them back, and even then, the Meiers let her chat only if a parent supervised. They allowed her to create her MySpace page despite the site's requirement that users be at least 14.

The chatter between Josh and Megan appeared banal -- How was your day? What music do you like? -- but Tina was still nagged by doubts, and called local police to see if there was a way to confirm who owned the account. How could she make sure Josh wasn't a predator? She remembers being told there was nothing to do unless a crime had been committed.

Once, Josh came online when Megan was at school and Tina was reviewing her messages. She recalls identifying herself and suggesting that Megan was too young for him. Hoping to scare him away, she mentioned her call to police. "He just said okay," Tina remembers. She figured that banning contact altogether would only fuel the fire. At least this way, she and Ron could monitor the chats.

On Sunday night, Oct. 15, Megan went online and was stunned to find a message from Josh, declaring he didn't want to be friends anymore "because I hear you're mean to your friends." Upset, Megan e-mailed
Josh to ask why he would say that. Josh was signed off, and Megan went to bed without an answer.

When she got home from school the next day, Megan rushed to check for messages from Josh. Heading out the door for an appointment, Tina ordered her daughter to turn off the computer. Ron was napping upstairs.

"I called 15 minutes later to see if she was off, and Megan was crying," Tina remembers. Nasty messages apparently were flying back and forth with Josh. Annoyed, Tina told Megan again to log off. Again Megan ignored her.

Fifteen minutes later, Tina's cellphone rang. This time, Megan was hysterical, and begged her mother to come home: She had to see what was happening online.

When Josh had refused to say who was supposedly telling him Megan was a bad friend, Megan had begun guessing, tossing out names from her old school. Some of those girls, also on MySpace, jumped into the fray. One, who had since moved to Ohio, rallied her new friends to attack Megan, too. Soon, "bulletins" were going out, linking friend-list to friend-list, broadcasting over MySpace that Megan Meier was fat, that Megan Meier was a slut, that no one should be friends with Megan Meier.

Tina found her daughter sobbing over the computer. Glancing at the screen, she saw that Megan had also sent foulmouthed messages. Tina reprimanded her and shut the computer off. "You're supposed to be on my side!" Megan shrieked before storming upstairs. Her father caught her on the landing. Those kids don't know you, he tried to soothe.

Neighbors heard Tina's scream that night over the rain outside.

A crowd gathered at the sound of sirens. The Drews were among those watching as an unconscious Megan was loaded into the ambulance, her heart barely beating. Lori Drew turned to someone and asked what happened.

Another neighbor would later remember a conversation with Drew that night, too. Drew had called and asked to speak to Michele Mulford's daughter as the emergency vehicles screeched up to the Meiers'.

"Just keep your mouth shut," the girl said she was told.

**Crushing News**

The next day, while Megan was on life support, Mulford broached the subject of suicide gingerly with her daughter, who, like Megan, was just 13. The girls had known each other since kindergarten but hadn't really moved in the same circles.

"As a parent, you panic," Mulford says. She told her daughter she didn't know what would have caused Megan to do something like this. Her daughter's reply stunned her:

"Mom, they had a MySpace account and were playing around with Megan. I sent an e-mail to Megan, too."

Mulford furiously called Lori Drew and demanded an explanation: What had she gotten her child involved in?

"She said: 'Okay, here's the deal: We created a MySpace account and found a good-looking boy on the
Internet and named him Josh Evans and played with Megan,' "Mulford recounts, adding that Drew admitted she had "panicked" and removed the Josh profile the night Megan hanged herself.

Investigators confirmed that the "Josh Evans" account was deleted and that, as the message trail began evaporating, only some of the exchanges with Megan could later be recovered from the Drews' or Meiers' computers.

Mulford learned that the Drews had told her daughter about the prank while carpooling one day, and gave her the password. Believing that the goal was to determine whether Megan bad-mouthed the Drew girl, the Mulford girl sent the message saying Josh had heard Megan treated her friends badly.

Michele Mulford didn't really know the Meiers when her daughter revealed the hoax. The day after Megan's death, she called the middle school's crisis counselor, sobbing. The counselor urged her to come to the school, and Mulford remembers parking her car halfway on the sidewalk and running into the office in her pajamas, where she collapsed on the counselor's floor and cried for two hours while pouring out the story.

While Mulford was agonizing over how to approach the Meiers, the Drews apparently were having no similar qualms.

They sent a huge spray of flowers to the Meiers and attended Megan's funeral. The Drews' daughter's birthday fell just three days after Megan's, and the Drews implored the Meiers to come to the party. "They started to sing 'Happy Birthday' and I left because I couldn't handle it," Ron recalls. Later, the Drews had Megan's younger sister over to bake cookies, and asked to hide their kids' Christmas surprise -- a foosball table -- in the Meiers' garage.

Mulford finally arranged to meet the Meiers at her own counselor's office. Tears mixed with rage and the Meiers hugged her and thanked her for coming forward. Everyone headed home to Waterford Crystal Drive. "I was maybe five minutes behind them, and as soon as I got on the street, I could see Ron with the foosball table," Mulford remembers. He and Tina were smashing it to bits.

Hearing the commotion, neighbors began to gather and watch.

Elusive Facts

"Tina and I drug that foosball table out of the garage and started going at it with an ax and a sledgehammer," Ron recalls. "We loaded it up in my pickup truck and dumped it on the Drews' driveway. It was in about 5,000 pieces. Tina spray-painted 'Merry Christmas' on the cardboard from the box."

When Curt, Lori and their daughter walked up to the Meiers' some 15 minutes later, saying they needed to talk, neighbors had to restrain Ron.

Later that day, sheriff's deputies knocked on the Meiers' door. The Drews had called about their demolished foosball table. It was one of many complaints they would lodge against the Meiers.

In her first formal complaint, Lori Drew put Megan's suicide into the public record with an explanation that would later outrage Web surfers who discovered it on TheSmokingGun.com. Accounts of the hoax by the Drews and Ashley Grills would later change so often and so drastically that the county prosecutor eventually issued a two-page list of facts and disputed facts, and conceded to reporters that getting the real
truth was impossible by now.

But in her initial story barely a month after Megan's death, Drew told sheriff's deputies that the neighborhood had grown hostile because people had "found out her involvement in Megan's suicide," the report says. It also recounts Drew's admission that she "instigated and monitored" the fake MySpace profile. The sole purpose, she told the deputy, was to find out what Megan was saying about her daughter.

Drew told deputies she "just needed" to talk to the Meiers to relieve herself of "responsibility" and guilt. She said she and her husband had tried three times already, "banging on the door" on Thanksgiving, and writing a letter of condolence. But the Meiers wanted no contact. She wanted the tension in the neighborhood documented, in case anything happened. It did.

Ron Meier was accused of driving his truck across the Drews' lawn and causing $1,000 in turf damage. "I didn't do it," he says. He estimates he has spent $3,000 in legal fees so far.

The only criminal charges filed in the wake of Megan Meier's suicide would be against her own father.

**The Wreckage of Lives**

In cyberspace, a blurry line still flickers between social justice and mob retribution.

Today, the Drews' phones ring unanswered, and video cameras mounted on the roof of their white rambler pan the property for trespassers. Curtains remain drawn, and a weary-looking man who answers the door politely refuses to comment, saying only that "we need to tread very softly right now."

Neighbors say they often see strangers drive slowly past the Drews' house and hear shouts in the night: *Murderer! Burn in hell, Lori!*

The sheriff's department increased patrols in the neighborhood, and Drew went into hiding with her daughter. The Drews' advertising business was forced to close, and Curt Drew's affiliation with a local realty firm was severed. Their daughter, now 15, has been too shaken to return to school, and Ashley Grills is under psychiatric care after threatening to hurt herself, according to county prosecutor Jack Banas, who decried the "vigilante mentality."

Michele Mulford and her daughter both remain in counseling because of Megan's suicide, Michele Mulford says, and her daughter does not want to publicly discuss what happened. The Meiers acknowledge the girl's remorse and say they have forgiven her.

The Meiers' marriage crumbled under the strain of the past year, and they have filed for divorce. Ron still lives in the same house, where two fairy-light angels glow each night from Megan's bedroom window onto Waterford Crystal Drive below.

A hundred or so people, many of them teenagers, gathered for a candlelight vigil one night this winter. Everyone stood in a green space across from the Drews' dark house. No one seemed to be home. Megan's family handed out pink polka-dotted fliers that demanded "Justice for Megan Taylor Meier" and vowed to fight to "change the laws -- one city, one state, and one country at a time." So far, only local ordinances have been passed, making cyber-bullying a misdemeanor.

Josh Evans exists now only as a closed FBI file. In a MySpace survey, he said he wore size 13 1/2 shoes,
preferred cappuccino to coffee, didn't smoke or take drugs and had never shoplifted. He sometimes swore. He liked girls with long brown hair and said weight didn't matter. The final question asked what things in his past he regretted. The answer was typed in capital letters, a shout from a nonexistent boy in a virtual world.

"NONE," he said.