

# Friend Game

Just past suppertime on a starry night in November, several cars pulled up outside 251 Crystal Drive, in Dardenne, Missouri, where news vans had been parked for weeks to cover a tragedy that came to be known as the MySpace Suicide Hoax. A reporter for “Good Morning America,” stood on the front lawn yelling into his cell phone. The two-story house was the home of Megan Meier.

A year earlier, Megan had committed suicide after an exchange of hostile messages with a boy who had befriended her on MySpace. She was thirteen, a volleyball player and a dog lover. She described herself: “M is for Modern, E is for Enthusiastic, G is for Goofy, A is for Alluring, N is for Neglected,” She had written this in a poem that went with her MySpace profile. Now she was gone. Megan’s suicide was caused by a hoax, involving a boy named Josh Evans. Josh Evans was a fake, a cyber-character created by neighbors of the Meiers.

A picture of Megan was posted on the front lawn of the Meier’s home.

In the picture, Megan was wearing a crown. Her eyes were rimmed with black eyeliner, her brows plucked, her brown hair prettily lifted off her face in layers. She stared directly at the camera, putting her lips into the half-sexy, half-silly, look that is a common style of American teen-age girls.

Megan—Megan Babi was her Internet name—had used a similar photograph to illustrate her MySpace profile. It was just a casual snapshot, but something about it seemed to embody both the sadness and the energy of female teens. Megan loved Pink, a loungewear line by Victoria's Secret, which is popular for including a free toy "mini-dog" with some purchases. Like Pink, the photograph represented a tender contradiction: the girl who wants both a stuffed animal and a Miracle Bra. "Oh, god. Poor baby. How could she think she was ugly?" someone wrote on *Jezebel*, a blog aimed at women in their twenties, reading that Megan hated the way she looked. The pictures reminded one how hard a smile can be for a girl of thirteen. It was safer, Megan's pose suggested, to be cool than to be real.

Like many teen-agers, Megan and her peers carried on an online social life that was wilder than the one they actually lived. On MySpace, and on other social-networking sites, such as Friendster and Facebook, a person can project a larger, more confident self, a collection of favorite music, books, quotations, pleasures, and complaints. He or she, able to play with different personalities, is released from some of the little humiliations of being a middle-schooler—all it takes to be a Ludacris fan is a Myspace Site.

But trying on identities is, in the environment of the Internet, a riskier experiment than raiding Mom's makeup bag. Squabbles that would take days to grow in person can within seconds explode into full-blown wars. Disputes can also become painfully public. Sites allow users to rank their "Top Friends," so that the ever-shifting alliances of a clique are posted, for all to see, in a sort of popularity poll. Likewise, Myspace allows a person to pose a question—Is Caitlin hot or not?—to his or her network of acquaintances, who can follow the results via a brightly colored thermometer icon.

Teenage identities change so quickly online, and can be masked so easily, that, by the morning after Megan was pronounced dead, Josh Evans had vanished from MySpace. It wasn't until a month after her death that a neighbor named Michele Mulford told the Meiers that Curt and Lori Drew, who lived four houses down, had created "Josh" with their thirteen-year-old daughter, a longtime friend of Megan's. (An eighteen-year-old girl who worked for the Drews was also involved.) The two thirteen-year-olds had recently quarrelled. Mulford's own daughter, also thirteen, had been given the password to the account, and had sent at least one unkind message to Megan in Josh's name. Megan had accompanied the Drews on several vacations, and they knew that she was taking medication for depression. But they did it anyway.

For nearly a year, on the advice of the police, the Meiers had kept quiet about the Drews' involvement in Megan's death. After investigators determined that the Drews' actions, if cruel, had not broken any laws, the

Meiers spoke with Steve Pokin, a columnist at the local newspaper. Pokin revealed the hoax in his column on November 13th of last year.

“I know that they did not physically come up to our house and tie a belt around her neck,” Tina Meier told Pokin. “But when adults are involved and continue to screw with the mind of a thirteen-year-old-- with or without mental problems -- it is absolutely terrible.”

Pokin’s story threw first Dardenne Prairie and then everyone else—guidance counsellors, techies, parents, bloggers, into madness. They were all certain that something sick, and distinctly modern, had happened, but no one could agree about whether its source was a culture that encouraged teen-agers to act too grownup or one that permitted grownups to behave like teen-agers. An Australian newspaper mentioned the television show “Desperate Housewives,” declaring that Crystal Drive had “been transformed into a real life version of Desperate Housewives.” Amid the furor, Jack Banas, the prosecuting attorney for St. Charles County, announced that he would reopen the case. He would search for whether a law had been broken.

Back in the Meiers’ living room, the reporter for “Good Morning America” was attempting to warm up the Meiers—Ron, a tool-and-die maker, and Tina, a real-estate agent. “The producers in New York have some really moving pictures of the girl, and I’m going to have to ask you about that,” he said. Tina nodded. A thirty-seven-year-old with wholesome features and a blond hair, she looked tired. So did Ron, a big man wearing

a plaid shirt.

Before the taping, Ron gave Tina an empty and searching glance. The cameraman was hoping to capture it. “Could you look at your wife again?” he said. Then he asked Tina, “Could you look at your husband?”

“Stop!” Tina said, holding a palm up, before bursting into strained laughter. “We’re getting a divorce.”

They say that happens when a couple loses a child.

When the filming was over, Tina drove to her mother’s house, twenty minutes away. Ron still lives on Crystal Drive. So do the Mulfords and so do the Drews, whose porch light stayed on into the night.

Dardenne Prairie is a town thirty miles west of St. Louis, near the Mississippi River. Around seven thousand people live there, a seventy-percent increase since 2000. Ron and Tina Meier both grew up nearby. They met in the second grade, and in high school they were prom dates. In 1990, when Tina was nineteen and Ron was twenty, they married. Two years later, Tina gave birth to Megan. “She was just this little chunky thing. She always had an attitude,” Tina said recently, sitting in her mother’s living room. In 1994, the family moved into a new house in the new housing subdivision, where developers plowed corn and soybean fields and laid down suburban lawns sod as green as Palmolive dishwashing liquid.

Waterford Crossing is a neighborhood of modest one and two-story houses. With few trees or fences to obstruct conversation, or to offer privacy, Waterford Crossing inspires neighborliness. Crystal Drive was a particularly friendly block: residents talked in their driveways or back yards, invited one another for drinks on the patio and for Super Bowl parties, carpooled, dog-sat, shared with one another the numerical codes that would open their garage doors. “There were, like, a bunch of families, all sort of friendly,” a teen-ager who lives in the neighborhood, told me.

As Megan got older, she demonstrated a worrisome volatility. “Megan could come in a room and be happy, and something could affect her and she would just switch to wild or crazy,” Tina recalled. In the third grade, Megan told her mother that she wanted to kill herself. The Meiers took her to see a psychiatrist. Megan was prescribed Celexa (an antidepression drug), Concerta (for A.D.D.), and Geodon (a mood stabilizer). “I, as her mom, always felt it was her weight. Megan always just felt like she was never enough,” Tina recalled. “Even in kindergarten, she made a comment about how she didn’t like her legs compared to other girls’ legs.”

Still, Tina said, Megan “was not some kind of depressed kid every step of the way.” Sixth grade “wasn’t horrible,” but Megan had some trouble with girls in her class. She loved going fishing with her dad, watching horror movies, and playing with her Chihuahua dog, Barry. “Megan had imagination,” Ron told me.

Around the neighborhood, she maintained a reputation for

fearlessness. One boy recalled, “Me and my brother were scared of frogs—she wasn’t. She’d stick it in our faces.” Megan was loud and funny; she laughed in big, air-sucking gasps. For years, she had served as the self-appointed guardian of a blind boy at her school, leading him through the hallways between classes.

In 2005, “seventh grade started, and that’s when it was just a mess,” Tina said. “Megan was trying desperately to fit in.” Her parents were particularly upset by her insistence on having what Tina called “the instant maturity look.” Others called it a slut look.

Friendships came and friendships ended.

That year, Megan Meiers and the Drews’ daughter maintained a fickle friendship. (In 2004, Tina sold the Drews their house.) The Drews’ daughter, according to neighbors, was behaved and obedient, while Megan had the wilder, more domineering personality. The girls would go on periods of companionship. “They would do all day Friday, do all day Saturday, and, by the time Sunday came, they weren’t getting along. Megan needed her space,” Tina recalled. Sometimes this left the Drews’ daughter feeling rejected, and, according to Tina, “Lori and Curt would get ticked off that Megan wasn’t liking their daughter..”

All parents take offense at insults to their children, but the physical closeness of the two families, and their roles in the neighborhood of Crystal Drive, made the situation tense. According to some of their neighbors, the

Drews had never been popular on the block. They seem to have been regarded as local inconveniences, their offenses good-humoredly endured but regularly remarked upon, like those of a barking dog. “Lori was slightly annoying, but I didn’t see a cruel streak,” Michele Mulford said. Christine Buckles, a neighbor and mother, recalled that they were “kind of pushy. They’d been here for a couple of months, and felt like they should be included in everything everybody did.” People would excuse themselves when the Drews lingered in conversation. Nevertheless, Tina Meiers says that she asked Megan to be nice to the Drews’ daughter.

“Listen,” she’d tell her. “You can’t just call her when you have nothing else to do.” But the relationship between Megan and the Drew’s daughter fizzled, with some hard feelings.

For eighth grade, Ron and Tina transferred Megan from public school to Immaculate Conception catholic school, where the classes were smaller and uniforms were mandatory. The change was “wonderful,” Tina said, with Megan “not paying attention to her hair as much, not worrying about undereye concealer.” She was becoming a nice American small town girl.

Or so it seemed.

Megan soon began asking her parents for permission to open a MySpace account, so that she could chat with her new friends.

Tina and Ron were hesitant: the year before, Megan and the Drews’

daughter had secretly set up a MySpace account. They were found out when a cousin of Tina's discovered the profile, which featured a flashing Playboy bunny icon. The Meiers did not mention the incident to the Drews. According to prosecutor Jack Banas, Lori Drew, going through her cell-phone bills, found that someone had placed a series of calls to New York. Lori's daughter told her that Megan had made the calls, to talk to a boy they had met online. The Drews and the Meiers never discussed that incident, either.

“Just think about it, Mom, please!” Megan persisted. “Please, for my fourteenth birthday can I get a MySpace account if you approve of what's on there?”

Tina and Ron agreed to allow Megan to open an account, with some restrictions:

1. Your dad and I are the only ones who know the password.
2. It has to be set to 'private.'
3. We have to approve the content.
4. We have to be in the room at all times when you're on MySpace.”

Megan agreed.

On September 13, 2006, the profile for **Megan Babi**—“Female, 14 years old, getto st. louis, MISSOURI, United States”—went live. For her instant-messaging name, Megan chose “prettybling16.” She wrote, “I'm an 8th grader at icd school \* I'm goin to st. dominic high school \* um I like love

to hip hop dance and I love to shop \* ya theres really hott guys at my school they are fine!!!”

What exactly do teenagers find so compelling in the world of the Internet? And why are parents so frightened by what the Internet offers? No one knows, really. This world is largely an unknown universe to most adults.

MySpace, with its cluttered layout, works something like this: a person signs up (all he needs is an e-mail address) and then constructs a profile for himself by choosing text, songs, graphics, wallpaper, and video clips. Often, when you open a page, the music’s already thumping, as if you’d stumbled into a party in someone’s basement.

The art on the site is like a bulletin board in a lava lamp: tack up a bunch of stuff and set it blazing in bubbly neon. Black backgrounds with cramped, colored fonts are popular, as are blinking banners, cartoon characters, hearts, exclamation points, pictures of cars, and graffiti-style writing. MySpace has a wild grammar that will shock any English teacher; its users manipulate lowercase and capital letters for visual effect. “Z”s are more common than “s”s, so that “Miss Honey Love” becomes “Mz.Hon3y Luv.” A boy named Shane writes his name “\$h@NE,” in the pasteup style of a ransom note.

Unlike Facebook, MySpace does not require its users to identify themselves with a first and a last name, so there is little illusion, even, that a profile possesses any direct correspondence to a flesh-and-blood individual.

At thirteen, Megan was technically too young to have an account—users are required to be at least fourteen—but MySpace has not instituted any effective means of enforcing its age restrictions. MySpace’s attitude toward its users seems to be “Let it be“. Anyone wishing to report an impostor, for instance, is asked to submit a “salute”: “This means we will need an image of yourself holding a handwritten sign with the word ‘MySpace.com’ and your Friend ID. . . .” (A Web site asking its users to communicate by poster board and markers seems similar to the telephone company saying that it accepts complaints only by carrier pigeon.)

Given this universe, a universe so comfortable to teenagers, how does an imposter like “Josh” come in to deceive a girl like Megan Meiers? The trick is to appeal to a user’s deepest desires? For a teenage girl, that desire takes the form of a handsome young man.

In mid-September of 2006, Megan received a friend request from Josh Evans. “The picture of him was adorable,” Tina recalled. “He had big blue eyes, very cut features, brown wavy hair.” Josh’s profile said that he was sixteen years old and six feet three. He had a great chest, preferred Coke to Pepsi, didn’t eat sushi (“no eww”), owned “a trillion” CDs, and liked pizza with “green peppers, pepperoni, sausage OH YEAH.”

The purpose of “Josh Evans,” according to the Drews’ testimony to Jack Banas, was to ascertain whether Megan was making nasty remarks about their daughter, whom Megan had previously called a “lesbian.” Initially, a police officer wrote in a report that Lori Drew had “instigated” and

“monitored” the account; she now contends the report is inaccurate, and has asserted that she merely agreed to the idea, which her daughter and Ashley Grills, the eighteen-year-old who worked for a direct-mail business that the Drews ran from their dining room, initiated. (According to Banas, Grills has been hospitalized for psychiatric care as a result of the case.)

Whoever, exactly, came up with “Josh” conjured more than a perfunctory decoy. An online Frankenstein’s monster, geared to the needs of an insecure, excitable teen-age girl, Josh’s components were carefully chosen to exploit Megan’s vulnerabilities. His profile picture was lifted from that of a handsome teen-age boy. He listened to Rascal Flatts, Korn, and Nickelback. His “turn-ons” included tongue piercings and being nibbled on the ear.

Playing on Megan’s susceptibility to underdogs, Josh’s creators endowed him with a pitiable bio: “when I was 7 my dad left me and my mom and my older brother and my newborn brother . . . poor mom yeah she had such a hard time . . . finding work to pay for us after he left.” His ambitions also seemed tweaked to Megan’s desires. His answer to the section “Goal you would like to achieve this year” was “meet a great girl.” The girl he was looking for happened to have long brown hair, like Megan. As for weight, Josh answered, “DONT REALLY MATTER.”

“Can I add him, Mom, please, please?” Megan said.

Tina eventually gave in. “You can add him,” she said, “but if there’s

one cross word delete him. If he's, like, 'Hey, hot stuff, you wanna come meet me?,' bloop, gone."

For the next four weeks, Megan and her friends carried on a high-spirited correspondence. Their talk, as goofily digressive as any teen-agers', was occasionally marked by innuendo and backbiting, but most of it wouldn't have rated a PG-13. "Haha O K. . . well I can allow you to have Nick Lachey and Zac Efron as your best men," Megan wrote to a friend as they discussed their hypothetical weddings.

It's the sometimes inorganic genesis of friendships on MySpace that leads to many of its unsavory moments, when people who have never met—or don't exist—infiltrate one another's lives in intimate ways. Care Bears on Fire, a preteen punk band, captures the medium's potential for embarrassing betrayal in a song called "Met You on MySpace," about being duped by a unicorn: "You said you were 12/And lived in my nabe/But you're really 300/and you live in a cave."

Mistaken identities have been a staple of human interaction from Jacob and Esau to Shakespeare, but electronic communication has made misrepresentation temptingly immediate, a development not lost on the producers of "You've Got Mail." The conventions of romantic comedy, though, have required that the parties who detest each other in their workaday existences come to know each other's charms in the parallel universe of the computer. The other way around—proxy war perpetrated online by people who, like the Drews, feign affection face to face—and it's a

horror movie. If the classic suburban crime of passion once involved a dusty attic, it may now feature a home office.

The Drews have contended, through a lawyer, that “all messages sent”—from Josh to Megan—“were positive until the last twenty-four hours” of the correspondence, but there were some weird episodes in the twenty-nine days that they exchanged messages. Once, when Megan asked Josh for his phone number, he replied that he didn’t have a phone. Another time, Josh asked Megan if she wanted to touch his pet snake, which alarmed Tina. (Megan thought that her mother’s interpretation of the offer was disgusting.)

One day, Tina was online and Josh instant-messaged her, thinking it was Megan. That day, Josh was Ashley Grills, a recent high-school graduate, who, according to Jack Banas’s report, was the most active of Josh’s online impersonators. Tina typed a message: “Hey, I think you’re a little old for my daughter.” Josh apologized and quickly logged off. Tina says that she called the police to try to find out whether Josh was legitimate, to no avail. She recalled, “Megan then wrote, ‘Hey, my mom contacted the po-pos to see if you were real or not,’ and Josh said something like ‘She’s probably just trying to protect you.’ That was another red flag. Usually, a sixteen-year-old would just say, ‘What a bitch.’ ”

In spite of Tina’s misgivings, she was thrilled to see Megan happy. “He would say, ‘How was your day?’ ” Tina recalled. In response to Megan’s tiara picture, he wrote, “You’re my beautiful princess.” On October 12th, Megan

wrote, to a friend, "JOSH=ABSOLUTELY AMAZING!!!! JOSH=100% AMAZING!!! yeah, that's right."

On October 15th, Megan received a message from Josh, written by Michele Mulford's daughter from the Mulfords' home computer. Mulford says that one day when her daughter was playing at the Drews' house someone told her about the Josh Evans account, gave her the password, and encouraged her to join in the game. Her message to Megan, as Josh, said that he had heard she was mean to her friends. In the course of the day, Megan's anxiety escalated. "What???" she wrote at 8:57 P.M. "Umm how bout no were the hell u gewt this?" she wrote, frantically, at 8:59. At 9:00: "Who are u even talkin bout umm ya idk." 9:03: "Ok how bout no tell me who they are and ya so w/e u know u ant to nice ur self!!!!!" 9:05: "What the hell did I even say?"

On the sixteenth, Megan went to school, where she passed out invitations to her fourteenth birthday party, which was to include a game of flashlight tag around the subdivision. At 3:20, Tina picked Megan up at school and dropped her off at home. In the basement, Megan immediately logged on to MySpace. Tina had to take Megan's sister, Allison, to the orthodontist, and, before she left, she told Megan to get off the computer. Ron had worked the early shift and was upstairs taking a nap.

From the orthodontist's office, Tina called Megan to check on her. Megan was crying. She admitted to Tina that she was still online, and that some kids were mocking her. Twenty minutes later, Tina called her again,

and found her sobbing. “Mom, I can’t even explain!” she said.

When Tina got home, at five o’clock, she found Megan in front of the computer in a state of superheated distress. An insult war had broken out among Megan, Josh, and some of their friends. Megan had called another girl a slut, and the aspersions were returned in kind. Ron says that after Megan died he discovered a final message from Josh, saying, “You’re a shitty person, and the world would be a better place without you in it.”

Tina and Megan argued. Someone had sent a message calling Megan fat, and Tina saw that she had replied, “I’m skinny now.”

“Why would you say that?” Tina asked.

“You’re supposed to be my mom,” Megan said. “You’re supposed to be on my side!” Megan ran up to her room, bumping into Ron on the stairs. After about twenty minutes, Tina had a “god-awful feeling.” She went upstairs to Megan’s room and found her in the closet. Megan had used a cloth belt—Tina had just bought it for her at Old Navy—to hang herself from a closet organizer. Tina saw her immediately, as Megan had recently persuaded Ron to take the doors off her closet, replacing them with a pair of translucent purple curtains. As ambulances raced down Waterford Crystal Drive, Michele Mulford’s telephone rang. It was Lori Drew, who asked for Mulford’s daughter. “Mrs. Drew said that something’s happened to Megan, and for me to keep my mouth shut,” Mulford says her daughter told her, though Drew denies trying to hush the girl.

Over on Hanley Road, just across the street from Immaculate Conception, the Dardenne Prairie mayor's office was in chaos this past November. Tacked to one of its walls was a memo, scrawled with pink highlighter:

Dear officers (especially night shift)—

Please provide extra patrol for Waterford Crossing, particularly Waterford Crystal Drive. We are concerned about any suspicious activity in light of the recent media attention.

In the three weeks since Steve Pokin's article appeared, public opinion against the Drews had been harsh, verging on violent. Much of the outrage was directed at Lori Drew as an exemplar of the micromanaging "helicopter parent," a familiar image at least since the Wanda Holloway case. In Channelview, Texas, in 1991, Holloway, a home-maker, attempted to hire a hit man to eliminate a neighbor, Verna Heath, the mother of a girl, Amber, who had twice been elected cheerleader over Holloway's daughter, Shanna. But Channelview and Dardenne Prairie, where teen-agers still have after-school jobs, are not type-A parent/overscheduled kid kinds of towns. Like Wanda Holloway, Lori Drew may not have represented a helicopter parent so much as a more ancient archetype: the resentful neighbor.

Lori Drew has shown little remorse, contending, through a lawyer, that she is the undeserving victim of an “avalanche of criticism.” Her statement suggests that she may have been less an overbearing parent than an indifferent one:

Although she was aware of the account, Lori Drew never sent any messages to Megan or to anyone else using this MySpace account. . . . Lori Drew was not aware of any mean, nasty or negative comments made by anyone against Megan until after Megan took her own life. . . .

Pam Fogarty, the mayor, had two hundred unanswered e-mails in her in-box. “People are shocked, and they’re pissed as hell!” she told me. Fogarty shared her constituents’ indignation. The week before, by a unanimous vote, the town’s Board of Aldermen had passed Ordinance No. 1228, “providing for the offenses of harassment and cyberharassment within the city of Dardenne Prairie, Missouri.”

Whether out of shame for what they did or over rumors sparked by what they did not do, the Drews had assumed a bunker mentality. Neighbors said that Curt Drew had taken to getting into his minivan and backing down the driveway to retrieve the mail. Their daughter is not attending school. Someone threw a brick through their kitchen window and, in April, the side of their house was splattered with a paintball. “I’ve got a county here that people are busting these people’s property up, setting up fake Web sites,” Jack Banas told me. “I’m getting calls from India and France!”

One afternoon, I went to the Drews' house and an older man wearing a Central Missouri State sweatshirt opened the door. "They can't speak," he said apologetically, and closed the door.

The desire for vengeance had been even more virulent online, as people pursued the Drews in a computerized version of a tar-and-feather brigade. On message boards, commenters posted the Drews' home address and Curt's business address (under the heading "Child Killer"), organizing a telephone and e-mail campaign against them and the businesses advertised in *The Drew Advantage*. Someone hacked into Lori Drew's voice mail. On YouTube, one could watch a creepy video showing photos of Lori Drew—whose physical unloveliness many took as corroboration of a loserish iniquity—intercut with images of an evil clown from a Stephen King movie. The video was set to The Who's "Who Are You?" A vicious blog called "Megan Had It Coming" appeared on the Internet, and people claimed, unconvincingly, that it was written by Lori Drew. The blog is now the subject of a separate investigation by the St. Charles sheriff's department.

On November 25, 2006, the day that Ron and Tina learned that Josh Evans was a fabrication, they went to their garage and removed a Foosball table. They had been storing it at the request of the Drews, who planned to give it to their children as a Christmas present. Using an axe and a sledgehammer, Ron and Tina bashed the table to pieces. They dumped the debris in the Drews' yard, in a box on which Tina had spray-painted "Merry

Christmas.”

Lori Drew called the police. According to the police report, she “wished to inform law enforcement about a neighborhood dispute.” This was the report in which Lori admitted to being actively involved in—rather than, as she now contends, vaguely aware of—the Josh Evans hoax. Lori told the police that she “felt this incident contributed to Megan’s suicide, but she did not feel ‘as guilty’ because at the funeral she found out that ‘Megan had tried to commit suicide before.’ ” (Megan had never tried to commit suicide.) In January, the Drews filed a complaint, saying that Ron Meier drove by while they were shovelling the driveway and shouted, “Who are you gonna kill today?” Ron has been charged with a misdemeanor for performing a “lawn job” on the Drews’ front yard. (He denies it.)

On December 3rd, after his review of the case, Jack Banas announced that no charges would be brought. In Banas’s reckoning, the Drews are conclusively guilty of little except egregious judgment that set off a chain of horrible events, and deep insensitivity in their aftermath. He invoked the Duke lacrosse case as a cautionary example of due process succumbing to the passions of a community inflamed. “Are you going to hug this lady, say she did something great?” he told me. “No. She made a huge, fatal mistake by trusting these kids. But there are undisputed facts and disputed facts, and even if you believe all of them they still don’t give you a criminal fact pattern in the state of Missouri.”

The Meiers do not hold Ashley Grills responsible, nor do they blame

Michele Mulford's daughter, who sent the message that kicked off the online melee on October 15th. "If you don't think that child wishes she could go back and change that . . ." Tina said. "It could easily have been Megan doing that."

Shortly after Steve Pokin's story broke in the Suburban Journals, Tina Meier ran into Lori Drew at a shopping center. Tina followed Lori to a pizzeria. When Lori walked out, Tina entered the store and spoke to the owner.

"Do you advertise with The Drew Advantage?" Tina asked. "If so, I advise you to take a look at the Journals. The girl involved was my daughter." She did the same thing when Lori went to Divine Nails, several doors down.

"Tina, just please stop this," Lori said, in the parking lot.

"Stop this? Lori, I will never stop this."

Tina Meier, at the end of November, recalled the atmosphere at Waterford Crossing in the days before the trouble started: "Then it was fun and goofy and the kids were out and things were good." In the weeks after the suicide, Megan's MySpace in-box filled with remembrances and apologies. One girl who had been involved in the fight on the night of Megan's suicide wrote to Tina:

Hi . . . you might not know me . . . but [my friend] used to live in missouri and be friends with your wonderful daughter . . . [we] get made fun of too. being called whores etc . . . etc. but we're doing everything we can to stop bullying . . . because we dont want something this terrible to have to happen to anyone again . . . we're going to counselling . . . and i think we're really gunna start to make a difference. ♦