

L.A. files 'cyber bully' charges against Missouri mother in connection with girl's suicide

Lori Drew is accused of creating a fraudulent MySpace persona whose comments may be linked to the teen's death.

By Scott Glover and P.J. Huffstutter, Los Angeles Times Staff Writers
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Invoking a criminal statute more commonly used to go after computer hackers or crooked government employees, federal prosecutors in Los Angeles on Thursday charged a Missouri mother with fraudulently creating a MySpace account and using it to "cyber-bully" a 13-year-old girl who later committed suicide.

The girl, Megan Meier, hanged herself in her upstairs bedroom two years ago, shortly after being jilted by an Internet suitor she thought was a 16-year-old boy. The case caused a national furor when it was alleged that the "boy" was actually Lori Drew, the mother of one of Megan's former friends.

Drew, 49, of Dardenne Prairie, Mo., was indicted by a federal grand jury in Los Angeles. She is accused of providing bogus information to Beverly Hills-based MySpace when she created an account in the name of the imaginary boy, Josh Evans. Drew then used the account to obtain information about Megan in violation of MySpace rules, which she used "to inflict emotional distress" on the girl, prosecutors allege.

Speaking at a noon news conference, U.S. Atty. Thomas P. O'Brien said he believed it was the first case of its kind in the nation.

He said Drew, posing as "Josh," began flirting with Megan, telling her via e-mail that she was "sexy." The flirting went on for weeks and their correspondence took on an increasingly sexual tone before Josh abruptly cut off the relationship. O'Brien said Josh told the girl "the world would be a better place without her."

"This adult woman allegedly used the Internet to target a teenage girl with horrendous ramifications," O'Brien said. "This was a tragedy that did not have to happen."

Sal Hernandez, who heads the FBI office in Los Angeles, accused Drew of "hiding behind cyber walls in cyberspace" in allegedly perpetrating the hoax.

Drew's attorney, H. Dean Steward, denied that his client either created the MySpace account or directed anyone else to do so.

"There are a lot of issues we're going to need to raise, including why this case is happening in Los Angeles," Steward said.

"This seems like a Missouri case no matter how you cut it. There is a lack of connection with California. All of the witnesses are from Missouri, with one or two exceptions being from MySpace," he said.

Drew, who faces up to 20 years in federal prison if convicted, is expected to be arraigned in Los Angeles next month.

News of the indictment left Megan's parents, Tina and Ron Meier, in tears. The pair said they had all but given up hope that any criminal charges would be filed in their daughter's death.

"I just want some justice after all this time," said Ron Meier.

"For the first time in as long as I can remember, I actually have hope," he said.

Local and federal authorities in Missouri initially looked into the circumstances surrounding Megan's October 2006 death in Dardenne Prairie, an upper-middle-class enclave of about 7,400 people 35 miles northwest of St. Louis, but declined to file charges, saying they were unable to find a statute under which to pursue a criminal case.

O'Brien said attorneys in his office were aware of the case, saw a Los Angeles nexus because MySpace Inc. is a local company and began their own investigation with the assistance of prosecutors in Missouri and FBI agents in Los Angeles and Missouri.

Before the grand jury was convened, the Meiers said, officials from the U.S. attorney's office in California traveled to Missouri to talk to them and other potential witnesses about the details of the MySpace communications.


Among those questioned by the grand jury, according to sources, was 19-year-old Ashley Grills, a former temporary employee in Drew's advertising coupon business.

Grills could not be reached for comment Thursday.

But earlier this year, she told ABC News' "Good Morning America" that she, Drew and Drew's teenage daughter had taken turns typing out messages to Megan Meier. During the interview, Grills said that Lori Drew tapped out messages "when we didn't know what to say."

She said Drew told her to keep mum after Meier's suicide.

Specifically, Drew is charged with one count of conspiracy and three counts of accessing protected computers without authorization to obtain information.

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The indictment alleges that she provided false information when she registered for the MySpace account and violated various aspects of the company's terms of service, including prohibitions on soliciting information from anyone under 18 and using information obtained from MySpace to "harass, abuse or harm" other people.

MySpace did not respond to an e-mail request for comment.

The federal statute under which Drew is charged is more often used to prosecute defendants who have hacked into computers with the intent of causing damage or improperly accessed computers for financial gain, legal experts said.

Rebecca Lonergan, a law professor at USC and former federal prosecutor in Los Angeles, said applying the statute in this case is a stretch.

After reading the indictment, she said there was some ambiguity as to whether MySpace or Megan was the victim. The case hinges, she said, on getting the circumstances surrounding Megan's tragic death before a jury if the prosecution "has any hope of winning."

"This is an extremely aggressive prosecution," she said. "L.A. is doing a laudable thing in trying to find a charge. But I'm not sure the courts are going to let this stand."

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