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I Was There

An insider's look at the slaying of Sherrice Iverson and its aftermath

By Aaron D. Cohen

One year ago this month, on the last night of her life, seven-year-old Sherrice Iverson traveled to Primm, Nev., with her father and older brother in a dilapidated old van furnished with a filthy mattress and stained blankets. It was midnight on Memorial Day weekend and the three casinos in Primm were packed with Californians gambling and drinking. The arcades were packed with kids whose parents were at the tables or in front of slot machines.



Video taken in the Primadonna's arcade shows a man who police believe was Jeremy Strohmeyer following Sherrice Iverson.

Sherrice's father, LeRoy, gambled in Buffalo Bill's for a few hours, but was booted out because his daughter was running loose through the arcade area without supervision. LeRoy took Sherrice and his 14-year-old son Harold across the street to the Primadonna Resort & Casino (now called the Primm Valley Resort & Casino). He once again sent his kids to the arcade while he played quarter video poker. Once again Sherrice roamed free. Security warned LeRoy twice to keep his daughter supervised. Twice he told his fourteen-year-old son to watch her. Harold didn't.

Most Las Vegas have a pretty good idea what happened next. Video cameras captured images of a guy who looked a lot like 18-year-old Jeremy Strohmeyer playing tag with Sherrice. They playfully chased each other. She picked up a wet floor sign and tossed it at him, hitting his leg. The cameras showed him chasing her into the women's restroom. He ran out 20 minutes later.

She was found two hours later, strangled, molested, dead, sitting on the toilet, perched there with her feet off the ground so that she wouldn't be seen by anybody who wasn't peeking underneath the stall.

That's when they called me.

I was the public relations manager for the Primadonna Corporation when it happened. It was my job, with lots and lots of help from the Primadonna team and our PR firm, to deal with the press. You might remember me as "a Primadonna official" as in "Today, a Primadonna official confirmed..."

My phone rang that Saturday at 6 a.m. It was the second day of what was supposed to be my first three-day weekend in a long time. My wife and I had planned a small dinner party for that night. I was going to spend the evening with friends I hadn't seen in a while. My job was going well. Life was good. Even at 6 a.m. and drowsy, I was in a good mood.

It was my boss, Jennifer Lewis. "Aaron, you're going to have to come in," she said in a thin, shaky voice.

"What happened?"

"Well, it looks like a little girl was raped and killed in one of the restrooms."

I sat down. Then I got up, ironed a shirt, got dressed, tightened a tie around my neck and hit the road.

Enter the Father

One of the weird things about Day One was I got to meet and spend time with LeRoy Iverson, the father of Sherrice. When it comes to the Iverson incident, the only person Las Vegas despise more than LeRoy is Strohmeyer (see photo right). Judging from letters to the

Primadonna and talk radio, most folks blame LeRoy for what happened. And of course, quite a few blamed us at the Primadonna, but LeRoy brought his seven-year-old with him on an all-night gambling binge and she ended up dead. It's tough to put a positive spin on that story, but LeRoy's lawyers are trying.



More video from the Primadonna. The young girl to the right of the game is Sherrice.

I ended up spending time with LeRoy mostly because I was one of the few people around who hadn't been up all night and wasn't exhausted, mad, sad and ready to kill LeRoy. As I was to find out later, LeRoy can be, well, complex.

And I had the time to be the baby-sitter. We hadn't yet been besieged by news crews, and the executives and security people were busy with the small army of cops scouring the property. I first saw LeRoy slumped over in a wheelchair in the security office. His hair looked tangled and unwashed. His remaining teeth were yellow and crooked. His finger nails were long and yellow. His T-shirt was dirty and torn. The fly of his pants was open. I guess nobody had the heart to tell him to zip up. I found it hard to believe this guy was a father.

But I felt pain for him. I imagined that he was crushed, the light of his life snuffed out without explanation.

Then he demanded to go out to the casino and gamble. I suddenly understood why nobody seemed all too anxious to comfort LeRoy in his hour of need. The only need he seemed to have was to get back in front of a machine.

Wait! Do not judge him so quickly, as I did. Listen to the rest of the story and then judge for yourself.

First, we had to get him out of the casino. He wanted to gamble. In fact, he demanded that we couldn't stop him from going back to the casino if he wanted to. It was "a free country," after all.

He was loud, enervated. Then he grew quiet, lethargic. And maybe, I hoped, maybe he was sad. Then he was loud again. To me, he seemed drunk. There was no way we were letting him back into the casino.

Thankfully, his 14-year-old son helped talk him into going to a suite and maybe getting a bite to eat.

Once safely installed in the plushiest suite that the Primadonna had to offer, I sat with LeRoy and pretty much just listened to him babble. He was a cook in the Army. He liked quarter poker machines. He didn't like table games because he didn't trust the dealers. He had lived in New Orleans and loved the food there. Occasionally, he would think of Sherrice and say "Damn!" with frustration and exasperation. I kept waiting for a flood of tears. They never came.

He wanted a beer, Miller Genuine Draft. I was instructed not to open it. Apparently he didn't trust me either. I ran to the casino bar. I brought back the beer, but the wrong kind. I thought he had said "Miller Lite." LeRoy drank it anyway and complained about it being "piss water." Then his son informed us that LeRoy was a diabetic and wasn't allowed to drink.

Great, I thought. I just poisoned LeRoy.

LeRoy has since gone on TV with his lawyers and swore he didn't drink that day. His lawyers pointed out that he was diabetic and wasn't allowed to drink. It was part of an effort to prove that we Primadonna officials were conspiring against LeRoy to make it look like he was a bad father when in fact he was a wonderful father.

Someday, I might have to swear in a court of law to a few things about this case. One of them is that LeRoy did demand and received and drank a beer. I gave it to him. As far as being a good father, the lawyers can say whatever they want. I doubt his lawyers will be hiring LeRoy as a baby-sitter anytime soon.

But listen, I liked LeRoy. He was actually kind of charming. And it made sense that he was acting drunk. Here was a diabetic who had been up all night, probably hadn't eaten anything and his insulin shots were being monitored and administered by his 14-year-old son -- who was clearly not the most responsible person on the planet. LeRoy's blood sugar was either way too high or way too low. He was not thinking rationally.

He was rational enough to talk about how the insurance was going to have to pay. Despite his physical condition, LeRoy had thought things

through enough to know he would be suing us soon. "The insurance is going to have to pay for my baby," LeRoy said.

That was the sledge hammer that really knocked me in the chest. Sherrice was worth more to him dead than alive. With that realization, my Iverson Incident Depression set in.

Iverson Incident Depression

We all felt it. Everyone with a Primadonna employee badge had some kind of reaction, everything from shock to sadness to anger to numbness.

I walked past the restroom every day. It was about 75, maybe 100 feet from my office. When the frantic work pace slowed, the thoughts would enter my head. What happened in that room? When did Sherrice know? When did the killer decide? How many people used that restroom without knowing a dead little girl was perched on a stool in the next stall?



Sherrice Iverson, the victim.

"Are you all right?" my boss, one of the best people ever to grace this planet, would ask.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I would lie. For the first few days it seemed I was always on the edge of hysteria. We all were. An ugly brand of anger started to bubble. When there were no women in the room (and sometimes when there were), the male employees would devise elaborate, sadistic fantasies about what they'd like to do to the killer.

It was easy to think about, all the many cruel tortures, how good it would feel to inflict pain on someone so deserving. There's a little bit of the Spanish Inquisitor in all of us, just in case of emergency. But in the end, righteous sadism seems to only reveal the evil that lurks within us all. If I can engage in those fantasies, how different am I from the killer? Is justified bloodlust any better than random bloodlust? Maybe. But not by much.

Guilt also played a role in my depression. The whole thing was a great career move. How perverse is that? For the first time since taking the position, I felt like an important person in the company. Six-figure-earning people wanted, and took, my advice. I worked unreal hours, hardly eating, pumped full of adrenaline and anger and the high that comes from being the center of attention. I proved to my boss and my boss's boss and a few bosses above him just how great a job I could do.

Sick how life works sometimes, isn't it? You need wars to make war heroes. You need terrible crime to reveal the best cops. You need tragic hotel fires to figure out which firemen receive the medals. You need widespread political corruption to identify the journalists who deserve the Pulitzer Prize. You need something truly horrific to happen in your casino to know if your PR person is any good.

The Media Circus Begins

My job was to serve as a media liaison. Here were the rules:

- TV crews could shoot in the parking lot but not in the property;
- No cameras, video or otherwise, were allowed inside the casino or arcade;
- No one was allowed to interview guests;
- No one from the Primadonna Corporation would go on camera, but we would issue occasional written statements.



Jeremy Strohmeyer,
the accused.

Simple enough, right?

Immediately camera crews tried to sneak in the arcade and take shots of the restroom. They were easy enough to corral. It's a little hard to hide a huge video camera. Did they think security wouldn't be on the look out? I guess they had to try.

Then they started parking in the median of I-15, which was public property and immune to the rules. I'm pretty sure there is a law against attempting to stop traffic on a federal highway, but TV news is war and these folks were out to win.

Once all three Las Vegas TV stations were there with satellite trucks and news crews, and reporters from both newspapers were wandering around, a weird game of tag began. A reporter was caught trying to interview guests in the arcade. My beeper would go off and I'd run down there. A news truck was blocking traffic. *Beep*. I'd zoom back up. A news crew was in the back parking lot chasing down guests for comment. *Beep*. Another rule was being broken. *Beep*.

After two days of being a journalist goalie, I actually got to be fairly buddy-buddy with a couple of the TV news crews. The folks at Channel 3 even gave me a Quarter Pounder when they found out I hadn't eaten all day. It was like a peace offering during the cold war between PR professional and journalist.

Mostly the local media got it right. But the argument that casinos are dangerous places for kids was misguided; it took the out-of-town media -- the Los Angeles Times, the Orange County Register and the San Jose Mercury News -- to identify the real root of the problem: parents leaving kids unattended. Some people think that once you walk into a place of business, you're no longer responsible for your child's welfare. That's why Sherrice Iverson died.

Even Jeremy Strohmeyer knew it. In his confession, which is part of the arrest report, he said he hoped parents would now watch their kids better.

Me, too.

The Alien Invasion

During the first two days of the crisis, it was pretty much only Las Vegas media I had to deal with. Overall, they were nice folks just trying to do their job.

On Day Three came the alien invasion. Five, count 'em, five satellite news trucks from Los

Angeles rolled into the Primadonna parking lot like an occupational force.

The competition amongst these ambitious journalists was fierce; their strategy was often to put an unreal L.A. spin on the truth. I watched the live broadcasts and my jaw hit the floor more than once.

The spin. One reporter said she was "forcefully removed" from the casino before she could get footage of the "death arcade."

The truth. They walked into the casino with cameras and were told they'd have to film in the parking lot. If I really wanted to have them "forcefully removed," I could have had security tow their darn truck into the middle of I-15.



Jeremy Strohmeyer in court.

The spin. Another reporter said that remaining guests were "racked with fear."

The truth. The remaining guests were more curious than racked with fear. If they were so frightened, I'm sure they would have left. We didn't exactly lock them in their rooms. This reporter didn't even interview any of the guests because I didn't let him.

Each newscast became more fantastic than the last. The trouble was, there was no more news to be had at the Primadonna. The real news was happening in Long Beach, where the suspects were on the run, and in Las Vegas, where police were following up other leads.

The NAACP

The silliest press event during the crisis was staged by the Las Vegas chapter of the NAACP -- which planned to hold a press conference and accuse the Primadonna of being "racially insensitive."

When I heard about it, I just about went over the edge. Our security team had been working ungodly hours, going over thousands of hours of surveillance tape, searching for clues with the police. Suspects were found and captured because of that surveillance tape. Publicly, the company had been all but silent, issuing just a few statements. Our policy was to keep quiet because there was just nothing useful to say.

Privately, the company offered to pay for the funeral. The company offered to pay for counseling for Sherrice's family. The company flew in Sherrice's mother so she could see where her daughter had died.

Everyone who worked at Primadonna Resorts was in mourning. Race had nothing to do with it. As a company, we were all losing sleep, all in pain.

The NAACP coming out of nowhere with vague charges of racism was just too much. I went to the press conference, and sat in the back while Chapter President Rev. James Rogers railed about how LeRoy Iverson was a victim, complained that the Primadonna was woefully negligent and accused us of spreading lies about LeRoy to the press.

All the righteous indignation sounded pretty good until reporters started asking questions.

Wasn't it wrong to bring a seven-year-old to a casino in the middle of the night?

Perfectly fine, according to Rogers. When a family is in "vacation mode," kids should be able to stay up late.

Shouldn't LeRoy have made sure Sherrice was supervised?

He had every right to expect his seven-year-old to be safe in an arcade, Rogers asserted. Arcades were made for kids after all, just like schools. Nobody would have questioned LeRoy if he had dropped Sherrice off at school. Right?

Sitting there, I wondered how anyone could compare taking a kid to school and taking a kid to a casino in the middle of the night. So I asked one of Rogers' aides to let him know I was there and wanted to speak with him. After the press conference, we met in his office.

I didn't want to argue. I just wanted to let him know that we weren't trying to sully LeRoy's name. LeRoy had done that all by himself by making loud demands less than an hour after his daughter was found dead. I explained that the media were ravenous and leaks were inevitable. I couldn't quell them all.

Rogers listened patiently, then explained that he was mostly concerned for the children and wanted nothing more than to make Las Vegas a safer place. He saw an opportunity to do that. He told me he'd send me a list of safety concerns.

I said I'd be happy to arrange a meeting with him and Primadonna management. It never happened. We never heard from the NAACP again.

But we did hear from several citizens who had seen the press conference. Nearly all of these letters expressed anger at the NAACP and sympathized with Primadonna. (Somehow, the NAACP managed to make the Primadonna look like a victim. You can't pay for that kind of PR.)

The only station to notice me at the press conference, Channel 3, actually shot footage of me walking out of the room to avoid being on camera. On the 5 p.m. newscast, it was reported that "a Primadonna spokesperson attended the press conference. He had no comment."

That summed me up through this whole ordeal: The spokesperson with nothing to say.

Where Are They Now?

Jeremy Strohmeyer is due to go to trial in August for the murder of Sherrice Iverson. His lawyer Leslie Abramson has been working hard, but mostly failing. She failed to get his confession thrown out. She failed to keep a gag order in place. She failed to keep sealed the arrest report and the grand jury transcript. She failed to raise suspicions that someone else might have done it. She was successful in getting the trial moved from May to August, to accommodate further psychological

testing on Strohmeyer. Get ready for the same kind of legal circus we all saw with the Menendez trial, where Abramson actually managed to hang a jury, even though both suspects admitted that they had killed their parents.

LeRoy Iverson and *Harold Iverson* have filed a wrongful death suit against the Primadonna Resort and its Chief Operating Officer Chris Gibase, stating that the casino "purposely provided facilities and circumstances attractive to minors... to encourage parents to separate from their children." Gibase is accused of making allegedly slanderous remarks about a deal LeRoy Iverson supposedly offered the casino that would have allowed the company to avoid a lawsuit in exchange for \$ 100, a room at the hotel, airfare from Los Angeles to Las Vegas, funeral expenses for Sherrice and a six-pack of beer. The Primadonna Corporation is contesting the suit .

Yolanda Manuel, Sherrice's Iverson's mother, has filed a similar suit, which also names Jeremy Strohmeyer. The Primadonna Corporation is contesting the suit.

Clark County passed new rules governing the operation of video arcades; the new rules require the constant supervision of the arcades and the closing of the arcades by 10 p.m. on weekdays and midnight on weekends and holidays.

The Primadonna properties at Primm appear to be having a great 1998 after a financially lackluster 1997. A second golf course is scheduled to open this month and a new upscale outlet mall opens this summer. As for me, the Iverson tragedy has profoundly changed how I look at parenting, casinos, the media, the legal system, lawyers and life in general.

I'm not the only one.

At the time of the Sherrice Iverson murder, Aaron D. Cohen was employed as the Public Relations Manager for the Primadonna Corporation. He has since left the company.

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