

Los Angeles Times

Thursday, August 27, 1998

A Horror Story's Sad New Chapters

By SHAWN HUBLER, Times Staff Writer

The night was murky, though the spotlights gave the illusion that the view was actually clear. From far down Wilshire Boulevard, you could see the protesters boarding the bus to the demonstration, an odd jumble of stricken mourners and usual suspects and callers to talk radio, talking, talking, Chapters wanting . . . what? Something. Retribution? Publicity?

"No Justice! No Peace!" called the guy from the Jewish Defense League with the bullhorn. "Why can't I be on the bus?! I cared about that kid as much as the next guy!" carped the ubiquitous Melrose Larry Green. A wild-eyed man in a bandanna who said his name was "Big Money" held forth on "the system" as a cabbie with a kid in Nevada stood by, smoking. A little fat guy stuck his face into the camera. "What we're after," he said, "is a cloud of shame."

A yellow banner on the flank of the group's idling bus seemed, if you knew the situation, more focused. "Why Is David Cash a Student At Berkeley?" it demanded to know. Above it, someone had taped a small, Xeroxed photo of the child whose death was the reason for this confab. Frail and hollow-eyed, the child's grieving mother was being escorted down the sidewalk. "I'm so tired," the woman pleaded, her arms hanging like twigs from her big white T-shirt. "I just want this to be done." Of all the talk, that plea of exhaustion rang clearest as the fallout continued this week in the sad, sad case of Sherrice Iverson, slain in a Nevada casino last year.

It's hard to fully convey the seediness and confusion that have come to engulf this awful matter. You'd think things would be settled, what with the suspect, a body-pierced kid from Long Beach named Jeremy Strohmeyer, behind bars and awaiting trial, but the furor can't seem to make itself go away. Since last month, when the case was detailed on the front page of The Times, the call for outrage has acquired a weird carnival life of its own. On the sidelines, the stricken public has picked over the particulars as if they could add up to . . . what?

Something. The injustice of a poor black child's slaying. The enigma of a lethally disturbed white child of privilege. A cautionary tale for any parent feckless enough to think a casino arcade might be a good place to leave a small child at 3 a.m. . . .

But of all the demands, genuine and not so, the one that has evoked the most sound and fury has been the call for the hide of Strohmeyer's best friend. David Cash, then an honor student, watched Strohmeyer allegedly drag 7-year-old Sherrice into an arcade bathroom stall. He watched as the child struggled to break free. And then he left the room.

Unpunished, Cash was drawn to the media like a bug to a porch light, boasting that the person he felt sorriest for was his incarcerated pal. When talk-radio deejays Tim Conway Jr. and Doug

Steckler vowed to see him in prison, Cash cracked up. “If that ever happens, I will die of laughter,” he defiantly said on the air.

Well, you can see where this would get a rise out of the listeners. Fired up and not unaware of the inherent PR implications, the radio people led a busload of demonstrators to Berkeley on Wednesday, ostensibly to protest Cash’s position as a recipient of a tax-subsidized education at California’s premier public school. “Ostensibly” because, from the feel of the crowd, it was hard to imagine that this was solely about some creepy whiz-kid’s expulsion, despite the kid’s loathsome attitude.

Among other things, there was something unconvincing about the sexy view of Cash as some sociopathic tough guy. A personal theory is that he couldn’t shut up because it is a terrible thing to face the fact that you are weak. If I just keep talking, such people think, maybe I can come up with a set of words that won’t say, “I was a coward.” In that bathroom, something cut itself off from that boy’s heart. And now he can’t even muster the courage for an apology. Which, you like to think, is its own justice: For the rest of his life, David Cash will have to be David Cash.

But his pursuers can’t let up either, and this is also a kind of weakness. If we just keep talking, they seem to be saying, we’ll find enough words to bring back the world as we knew it, to restore our faith that our righteous anger is not powerless against these things.

The truth, of course, is something else. All the bus trips in the world won’t bring back that child, or erase the dark places within us or, for that matter, even get a kid like Cash kicked out of school. “Welcome to the world of people who give a damn!” one of the deejays shouted theatrically as the bus doors closed. If only the world were that simple. If only the murky night were so clear.