Fire Escape

August 1, 2000 By Laura Whitehorn

The Ray brothers—Ricky, 10, Robby, 9, and Randy, 8—were three kids living with hemophilia and HIV in Arcadia, Florida (pop. 7,000). The Citizens Committee Against AIDS in Schools persuaded the school board to bar the boys from classes, claiming that HIV could be spread by sweat, ticks and fleas. Louise Ray had to get a court order to enroll her sons on August 23, 1987. Reporters from People and Life converged on the town to cover this late-summer hurricane of citizen boycotts, death threats and sale of an "AIDS repellent spray."

Five days later, the Rays' home was torched. Jeanne White, whose son, Ryan, had also been harassed for having HIV, recalls, "After what Ryan went through, in 1984, you'd think people would have learned something. I'd been talking to Louise Ray, and she'd been telling me about the threats. So then she called me and said, 'They did it—they burned down the house.' I was shocked. It just showed the hysteria that went with AIDS."

Everyone assumed the AIDSphobes had struck the match. But this story has a twist: The firebug may have been a Ray family friend. Some locals say that the Rays were driven to ignite their own home because community fears of contagion made it impossible to sell.

"No question, the kids were disliked for having HIV," says Don Moore, who covered the de-Raying of the town for the local DeSoto Sun/Herald. "Arcadia wanted them out, and the Rays wanted out of Dodge. They couldn't get out unless they could sell the property, and they couldn't sell it because of the AIDS thing. If the house burned, and it was an attack—and everyone knows what stupid-ass bigots live in Arcadia—it would play great. In 1994, I got the confidential reports from the fire marshall and sheriff. On the night of the fire, everyone was gone except for one three-toed dude related to the Rays and his drinking buddy. The fire was set from inside the house." Moore published his investigation in a five-part series in the Arcadia paper.

Jeanne White has heard those rumors, too. "Whatever the real story was, it showed the hysteria in small communities. People with AIDS were not welcome," she says. "It was depressing. No one wanted to go through what Ryan and the Rays did, so it kept other people from coming out. It hurt kids and families with AIDS because it scared them from being public."

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