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HEADLINE: For teen's family, painful question lingers;  
Why?;  
Details of slaying still don't explain it

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BODY:  
When 17-year-old James Rogers didn't come home Mardi Gras night, his father set out to find him. Like any worried parent, Wayne Rogers feared the worst. But what he found horrified an entire community.

The LaPlace teenager, "Jimbo" to his family, had been killed after a party on Fat Tuesday by a group of youths thought to be his friends, police say. He was beaten and strangled with a belt, then dumped into the swamps near Louis Armstrong International Airport, where his body was found several days later.

Six suspects, ranging in age from 15 to 21, have been booked in connection with the killing. One of the most chilling aspects of the crime surfaced when authorities revealed the suspected motive: Rogers was killed because he wanted to leave the party.

Now, as the Rogers family mourns its loss, the community struggles to understand how young people could perpetrate inexplicable acts, and how they could turn on someone who considered them friends.

"One thing we feel certain about is that James had no idea what was coming," said Betty Rogers, an aunt. "He didn't have the antennas and instincts that could have read that. He didn't know a world in which someone could do such a thing."

Grief counselors have been working overtime at East St. John High School, where Rogers was a senior. A memorial service was held Thursday at his church in LaPlace.

Still, the pain and anger persist in a suburban community known more for high school football than teen violence.

"A lot of people are outraged and can't believe the level of violence that these teens and young adults would stoop to," St. Charles Parish Sheriff's Office spokesman Lt. Dwayne LaGrange said.

Misplaced trust

By most accounts, James Rogers was not a troublemaker. An avid outdoorsman, he had no criminal record and for the most part got along well with others.

"James was a good kid," the Rev. Ken Graham, the family pastor, said during a memorial service. "If I've heard it once, I've heard it a thousand times this week: He was a good kid. I don't know why it's not OK to be a good kid anymore."

Rogers had come to East St. John High School from private Riverside Academy last spring to be with friends, most of whom had transferred there in the past few years. Early this semester, some friends said, he befriended another East St. John senior, Brandon Stein.

Rogers' other friends, such as Jesse Adams, didn't think much of Stein. Adams, Robert Centanni, 17, and Steven Flowers, 17, thought Stein was into drugs. He behaved erratically. He talked about problems with his family. One night when they'd seen him out, he had burst into tears for no apparent reason.

"He had a lot of hurt in him," Centanni said.

Rogers wasn't angry or into drugs, Adams said. In fact, "he'd say anything just to make you laugh." But he was also nonjudgmental and wouldn't have cared if Stein liked to get messed up sometimes.

Adams and the others cared and told Rogers so. They thought Stein was using Rogers for his pocket money earned from working in his father's veterinary clinic, the Ranger truck he'd saved to buy and the awesome sound system he'd installed in the vehicle himself.

Rogers laughed off their fears, his friends said. On Lundi Gras, they saw him wandering parade routes in New Orleans with Stein, laughing and catching beads tossed from the floats.

"He thought Brandon was his best friend," Adams said.

Mardi Gras

Wayne Rogers was visiting his sick mother while his son spent Lundi Gras with Stein. On Tuesday, the elder Rogers called home and spoke to his wife, Sherry, who told him that James had landed a long-sought position working at a movie theater. By the time he got back to LaPlace, Wayne Rogers found his son in a good mood, filling out paperwork for the job and joking about some of the questions on the forms, Betty Rogers said.

The teen-ager asked if he could go play with Stein's new Xbox video game console that night. Wayne Rogers had some concerns about Stein, who'd never come over to the house for introductions, but he consented largely without reservations. He made his son promise to call at midnight.

About 8 p.m., James Rogers left home to pick up Stein and Stein's 16-year-old cousin, also a student at East St. John. But, according to authorities, they didn't play video games.

Instead, they took a 45-minute drive along Interstate 310 and across the Hale Boggs Bridge to the tiny, rural community of Paradis in St. Charles Parish. There they went to see Calvin Couvillion, a 21-year-old who'd dropped out of East St. John High several years ago. Couvillion's neighbors said he held regular gatherings at a vacant house along a set of railroad tracks there.

A former girlfriend of Couvillion's, Tracy Caillet, 18, the mother of his daughter, was also present, along with six or eight others from St. Charles Parish. Rogers didn't know them, but Stein did, Rogers' friends said.

Exactly what happened at the party remains curtained by silence. Most of those who attended are in jail. A gag order issued by a St. Charles Parish judge prevents sheriff's deputies from discussing it.

But the suspects' initial statements to police suggest this much: About midnight, Rogers wanted to leave the party. Stein wanted to stay. When Rogers started walking toward his truck, Stein charged out of the house, wrapped his belt around Rogers' neck and dragged him to the ground.

The attack must have lasted some time, authorities said, because Rogers' body showed the marks of hundreds of blows. The viciousness of the beating later stunned Rogers' friends, but not as much as what happened next.

Instead of calling for help, police said, the group decided to get rid of the corpse.

Authorities say Couvillion, Stein and Stein's 16-year-old cousin wrapped Rogers in a sheet and placed him in the bed of the same truck in which he'd picked them up just hours before. They covered the body with a mattress and climbed into the cab.

Authorities said they think the group then cruised the area for a time and pulled over along the elevated I-310 between St. Rose and Destrehan. Authorities said the group then heaved the body over the highway railing and watched it fall 60 feet into the palmettos and cypress knees that jut from the murky swamp.

Then they drove to LaPlace, where they abandoned the truck, shattered the driver's window and stole the stereo, authorities said.

Ash Wednesday

Rogers always called, so Wayne and Sherry Rogers got worried when he didn't. On Ash Wednesday, Wayne Rogers called St. John the Baptist Parish Sheriff Wayne Jones, a family friend. Then he went to see Stein.

Stein told Rogers that James had dropped him off in the parking lot of a grocery store in LaPlace and that he didn't know where he had gone after that. But by the time Rogers talked to Adams, a childhood friend of James', he had started to think Stein was hiding something.

"He told me straight up, 'Jesse, I think Brandon's lying,' " Adams said.

He also told Jones. Then deputies called to say they'd found James Rogers' truck in a vacant lot.

"We all knew this truck was the love of his life," Betty Rogers said. "One time I came to visit, and he just drove me around for about two hours, playing music on that stereo. The minute they found the truck, we knew something bad had happened."

Deputies questioned Stein and the 16-year-old that day, beginning to trace Rogers' movements. But authorities said they learned nothing. On Thursday and Friday, with deputies still hunting for clues, the teens went to school.

#### Grim discovery

By Friday, stories about Rogers' disappearance had hit the media. Two students at East St. John said they heard Stein proclaiming hope for Rogers' safe return but offering dire predictions against it.

Friday at 5 p.m., after repeated questioning, police said, the 16-year-old cousin implicated Stein, Couvillion, Caillet and others. Police swarmed Couvillion's home and grabbed Stein in LaPlace. They both admitted to the slaying, authorities said.

At midnight, deputies searching with flashlights from a motorboat found the body floating amidst Manchac swamp's wild irises, near where Rogers loved to fish. By the following Tuesday, they had also arrested Caillet; Terrel Gisclair, Couvillion's 17-year-old neighbor; and a 15-year-old girl, Gisclair's girlfriend.

Couvillion and Stein were booked with second-degree murder and are being held in lieu of \$1 million bail each. The other four were booked as accessories.

The crime apparently is solved. But Rogers' family and friends are haunted by questions that may never be answered.

"The thing I don't get is the girls who were at the party," said Jessica Adams, 16, Jesse Adams' sister and Rogers' ex-girlfriend. "Why didn't they call the police? Why didn't they stop it?"

Some at Rogers' memorial service blamed alcohol and drugs, abusive homes. Some pointed to what mental-health professionals call the "bystander phenomenon," in which witnesses to a violent act fail to intervene, as in the case of Kitty Genovese, a New York woman who was raped and murdered before dozens of onlookers in 1964 without anyone calling the police. Others blamed a national culture that they say teaches 17-year-olds that they can get away with anything.

But for Rogers' friends and family, the whole incident is beyond comprehension.

"I'll never understand the viciousness," Betty Rogers said. "They had no mercy. I'll never understand a mind or heart that could do that to someone so young and trusting."

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