

## False Confessions

Why did John Mark Karr claim he killed JonBenet Ramsey? And why did prosecutors arrest him on such flimsy evidence?

**WEB EXCLUSIVE**

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Aug. 29, 2006 - Trip DeMuth was extremely concerned. When the former Boulder, Colo., prosecutor who investigated the 1996 JonBenet Ramsey murder case learned last week that suspect John Mark Karr had been arrested only five days after investigators learned his name, DeMuth was afraid the whole case was based on Karr's own confession. But confessions aren't very reliable unless they contain inside information only known to a killer, and DeMuth also knew that virtually all the evidence had leaked to the public—and to someone who falsely claimed to be the killer. "I concluded back then that there was no way to trust a confession," DeMuth told NEWSWEEK last Friday.

DeMuth was right: Karr's own statements were all that prosecutors had. On Monday afternoon, Boulder District Attorney Mary Lacy announced that she wouldn't file charges against Karr for the brutal December 1996 killing of 6-year-old JonBenet. After 12 days of a media circus that started with Karr's arrest in Bangkok on Aug. 16 and finished with Karr a prisoner in a Boulder jail cell, Lacy conceded that she found no meaningful evidence linking Karr to the murder. "His DNA does not match that found in the victim's blood in her underwear," Lacy wrote in a motion to overturn Karr's arrest. Prosecutors, she wrote, "would not be able to establish that Mr. Karr committed this crime despite his repeated insistence that he did."

Karr certainly looked like a promising suspect. In court filings released this week, Lacy confirmed that the hunt started in April with increasingly suspicious e-mail exchanges between an anonymous man calling himself "Daxis" and University of Colorado journalism professor Michael Tracey, who has produced three television documentaries on the case. The e-mails led to 11 phone calls between Tracey and Karr, which were eventually traced to Bangkok. On Aug. 3, investigators arranged with Tracey for him to ship a photo of JonBenet to a Mail Boxes Etc. branch in Bangkok in order to learn his identity. Thai police traced him to an apartment building, and investigators finally learned the identity of Tracey's correspondent on Aug. 11. They arrested him five days later.

Karr's confessions ranged from the e-mails to police interviews, whose contents remain unknown. But he famously implicated himself talking to reporters in Bangkok shortly after his arrest. He said then that he'd been with the Ramsey child when she died, that her death was an accident.

## **In the e-mails posted by prosecutors after the announcement** (large PDF file),

Karr emerges as a man who was moved to confess after he learned that Patsy Ramsey, the dead girl's mother, was dying of cancer. Karr tried to use Tracey to contact the Ramsey family, since he knew that Patsy Ramsey was terminally ill, in order to "explain" that JonBenet's death was an accident. "I would like for you to tell them that a person who you feel strongly to be JonBenet's killer (I hate that term) "WISHES TO SPEAK TO THEM TO EXPLAIN WHAT HAPPENED THAT NIGHT AND TO EXPLAIN ALSO THAT THERE WAS NEVER ANY INTENTION TO KILL HER," Karr wrote to Tracey on April 30, using capital letters to quote from an earlier Tracey e-mail. On May 9, Karr wrote, "I want to bring her peace. [The Ramseys] need to know that [JonBenet] had a lover named Daxis, that a dashing Prince was with her when she died; that she was not viciously murdered; that I cared for her and tried to revive her when I thought she was dead. I loved her so much and I am so sorry that she died in my arms."

Karr laid out a theory of the death that suggested he had tied up the girl with a garrote in order to cut off her air supply to enhance sexual pleasure. In a May 22 e-mail, Karr wrote: "Are you asking me why I killed JonBenet? I don't see it that way." Instead, he said, "Her and I were engaging in a romantic and very sexual interaction. It went bad and it was my fault."

What leads apparently innocent people to make false confessions? Perhaps the most common reason is coercion. Overzealous law-enforcement officials sometimes hound suspects into admitting guilt even when they are innocent. Some suspects plead guilty to a lesser crime they didn't commit, because they may be convicted of the more serious charge of which they are also innocent, experts say.

Voluntary false confessions, like Karr's, are much less common, says Saul Kassin, a professor of psychology at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. Kassin says these false confessors are often psychologically disturbed men or women with extremely debased self-images. "In cases like this, often what you are looking at is a person with a pathological need for attention or recognition or fame," says Kassin. Mark Pogrebin, who directs the graduate criminal-justice program at the University of Colorado-Denver, describes false confessors as "people who want their day in the sun, so they connect their own obsession, in his case pedophilia, with a sensational crime." In Karr's case, says Pogrebin, "he got exactly what he wanted. The whole world watched."

But Kassin wonders whether Karr might actually believe that he is the killer. Some false confessors understand they are lying. Others delude themselves into believing they committed the crime by imagining it so repeatedly that they convince themselves of their guilt. "The more often a person imagines an event that didn't happen, the more likely they come to believe that it did," says Kassin, citing research into false memory. "We know that Karr has immersed himself in this case. It's possible he has become delusional and he's convinced himself that he did it."

Soon as the arrest was made, complications arose. Karr's second ex-wife, Lara Knudson,

told officials she believed he was with her that Christmas, either at home in Alabama or visiting Karr's father and brothers in the Atlanta area. The Karr family agreed. On checking, it appeared that Karr had never even been to Boulder until four years after JonBenet's corpse was discovered in her basement on Dec. 26, 1996.

Tuesday, D.A. Lacy defended the decision to arrest Karr despite what she called intense criticism that she be "tarred and feathered." "We felt we could not ignore this, we had to follow it," she told reporters. The need to arrest him was pushed in part by the fact that he had just landed a job at a Bangkok elementary school, and was allegedly making threats to a girl there. "There was a real public-safety concern here directed at a particular child," Lacy said. Although detectives did get sneak DNA samples from Karr's bicycle handlebars and a used tissue before his arrest, the laboratory officials advised Lacy's office that they needed a purer sample only available if they arrested him.

**Karr won't be charged in the Ramsey murder**, but he remains in the Boulder jail, awaiting an extradition hearing. Prosecutors in Sonoma County, Calif., want to try Karr on five misdemeanor counts of possession of child pornography that stemmed from an April 2001 arrest. Karr served six months in jail awaiting trial on those charges, but once he was freed he fled the U.S. in late 2001, avoiding trial. The pornography charges carry a maximum sentence of a year, but California prosecutors will likely add these to "unlawful flight" charges.

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