

Caught in the Web

The case of an Internet kiddie-porn king and his wife reveals a disturbing secret world

U.S. POSTAL INSPECTION SERVICE

CLICK HERE
CHILD PORN

This banner on Reedy's personal home page became a key bit of evidence.

There was no tense standoff, no shots fired or doors knocked down when authorities raided the Fort Worth home of Thomas and Janice Reedy on Sept. 8, 1999. Instead a team of U.S. postal inspectors and computer specialists calmly flashed their search warrants and marched into the spacious house perched on a hillside in an affluent neighborhood. "You think of officers in raid jackets busting in with guns drawn," says Assistant U.S. Attorney Terri Moore. "Here you had these geeks and science types seizing computers."

The results of that early afternoon intrusion, though, could hardly have been more dramatic. Nearly two years after postal inspectors arrested the Reedys, whose 9-year-old daughter was in school at the time of the raid, Moore prosecuted them on charges of running one of the largest child-pornography businesses ever uncovered. Their enterprise, which provided access to a suspected 300 child-porn Web sites, reached thousands of people in dozens of states and netted the couple as much as \$1.4 million a month.

Two weeks ago they finally learned their fate. Thomas, 38, was sentenced to 1,335 years in prison, making his the first life sentence ever handed down in a federal child-pornography case where the defendants were not also charged with molestation. His wife, Janice, 33, whom prosecutors viewed as more



Reedy (with Janice before their trial in '00) used "Houdini" as his Internet screen name.

RODGER MALLISON/FORT WORTH STAR-TELEGRAM/SIPA PRESS



"He loves her to death," says Forrest Reedy (right) of son Thomas and Janice (in '97).

COURTESY FORREST REEDY



The Reedys bought this \$425,000 home in an exclusive neighborhood in Fort Worth.

U.S. POSTAL INSPECTION SERVICE

of an accomplice than a driving force, received 14 years. Thomas Reedy's lawyer, Houston-based Steve Rozan, calls the sentence "a bunch of b.s. about sending a message to kiddie-porn wannabes," and says he plans an "aggressive appeal." Lt. Bill Walsh, a Dallas undercover detective on the case, sees it differently. The images available through the Reedys' Web site "would make the average person pass out," he says. "We saw children being assaulted and raped."

The repercussions of the raid did not end with the Reedys' arrest and the dismantling of their Internet business Landslide Productions, which had been operating since

1997. After confiscating the company's computer database—a list of 320,000 clients worldwide—postal investigators launched Operation Avalanche, which in a little more than a year has led to more than 100 arrests of people suspected of possessing child porn. Among those targeted: a Texas high school biology teacher, a former fire chief in Tennessee and several convicted pedophiles out on parole. Getting Landslide's subscriber list was "like finding the Holy Grail," says prosecutor Moore, 42, who points out that mere possession of child pornography breaks the Federal Child Protection Act of 1984. "Now we knew where all the creeps were."

At the center of it all is Thomas Reedy, the soft-spoken former nurse who claims his lavish lifestyle—he and Janice drove Mercedes-Benzes—was financed by legitimate means. Reedy maintains that he and his wife, who was their company's bookkeeper, simply operated a Web site that directed customers to thousands of legal adult Web sites. After paying a monthly fee—which the Reedys split with the porn producers—clients were given a password that allowed them to visit other sites.

Indeed, Wes Ball, Reedy's attorney during the 1999 trial, argued that Reedy twice contacted the FBI after clients alerted him that child pornographers were using Landslide to reach consumers. The FBI, says Ball, told Reedy he wasn't responsible for the content of the other sites. "He was convicted for not policing his Web site," says Ball, "but he didn't think he had to be a censor." Nonsense, says Moore, who notes the FBI first contacted Reedy and, believing him when he said he would get rid of the child-porn sites, did not pursue the matter. "He made it like he had this massive cooperation with the FBI," says Moore. "That's a lie."

The 1999 arrest was Reedy's first brush with the law. "He never got into trouble," says his father, Forrest Reedy, 63, who with his late wife, Lenora, owned a grocery and Laundromat in Ballinger, Texas. Thomas, who worked to help care for mentally retarded adults as a teen, was a vocational nurse in several hospitals before he taught himself computer programming in the early '90s and started a company that provided adult Web sites with age-verification software. "The money was coming in," says Reedy's father, adding that the porn didn't interest his son. "Money motivated him."

In 1996, having already married and divorced two times, Reedy began dating Janice Quick, an old friend as well as his third cousin. Raised in working-class Sonora, Texas, by Joe Lowe, 57, an oil-field worker, and Glenda, 53, a secretary, Janice was herself twice married by age 22, the second time to Thomas

Quick, with whom she had a daughter in 1992. "She was sweet and kind," remembers Johnny Acuff, who worked with Janice at the Sonora Food Market, where she was a cashier and later an assistant manager. "Her daughter was the most important thing in the world to her."

Still, Janice, an honors student and computer whiz at Sonora High, had bigger plans. Her ambition, she declared in her senior year newspaper profile, was "to be a millionaire." Four years after divorcing Quick, she married Reedy in 1997. "She's a naive country girl," says her lawyer Michael Heiskel. "She saw Thomas as an opportunity to provide for her and her daughter."

The Reedys bought their stucco mansion in Fort Worth in 1998 but didn't mix with their neighbors, says Bill Boese, 41, an architectural millwork owner who lived next door. In one of their few talks, Boese recalls Reedy "was almost timid, and you could tell you couldn't make an

hour's conversation with him. There were rumors he was involved in pornography, but not kiddie stuff."

In fact, Landslide Productions had caught the eye of postal investigators in April 1999, after several people who came across the site complained that it was trafficking in child pornography. The next month, investigators found their smoking gun: a banner on Reedy's personal home page labeled "Child Porn." "It was that blatant," says U.S. Postal Inspector Bob Adams. "You clicked on the banner, and it routed you to Landslide Productions. For \$29.95 a month you could purchase another site, and that was pure child porn."

After the raid, information technology specialist and computer expert Dane Ritcheson analyzed Reedy's home computer and downloaded e-mails from Reedy to customers that proved he knew they were accessing child porn. The inspector also found sexual images of children that Reedy had saved on his

computer. Janice, who claimed ignorance of the child porn, was incriminated by the checks she wrote to companies that provided the content for Web sites with names like "Child Rape" for their cut of the subscription fees. "Clearly," says Moore, "she knew it was child porn."

Of immediate concern to the authorities after the 1999 arrest was whether the Reedys had sexually abused Janice's daughter, who is now living with her grandparents. After determining they had not, prosecutors offered Thomas a 20-year sentence and Janice only 5 years if they would help convict the child-porn providers. The Reedys turned down the offer and opted for a trial. They lost their gamble, however, and Thomas was convicted on 89 counts, including sexual exploitation of minors, and Janice on 87. (Landslide was also fined nearly \$7 million.) "What Thomas Reedy received," says Rozan, Reedy's current lawyer, "was cruel and unusual punishment."

Anything but, argues Lt. Walsh. "We want a message to be sent to these people that we will prosecute to the full extent of the law anyone who hurts kids," he says. "But the Reedys are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to Internet child pornography, and there's no telling how big the iceberg is."

Pending his appeal, Reedy is now in his ninth month in the custody of U.S. marshals, right where his former neighbor Bill Boese, the father of three children, thinks he belongs. "There are some bad people in prison, and they're going to get hold of this guy and give him what he deserves," says Boese. "When it comes to kids, everybody draws the line."

● Alex Tresniowski
● Chris Coats and Bob Stewart in Fort Worth, Anne Lang in Sonora and J. Todd Foster in Washington, D.C.



"We knew we had the right people," says Inspector Michael Mead (left, with Inspector Bob Adams).