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# Town Is Shaken After Prosecutor's Arrest in a Child-Sex Sting

Children practiced football this week at Shoreline Park in Gulf Breeze, Fla., where J. D. Roy Atchison coached girls' softball.

By ABBY GOODNOUGH  
Published: September 29, 2007

GULF BREEZE, Fla., Sept. 25 — To neighbors here, J. D. Roy Atchison was a deft federal prosecutor, an involved father and a devoted volunteer, coaching girls' softball and basketball teams year in and year out.

J.D. Roy Atchison.

His wife is a popular science teacher; his youngest daughter, an honors student who was on her high school homecoming court last year. Their house, with rocking chairs on the porch, oaks in the yard and a wrought-iron fence, is among the prettiest in town.

But in an instant last week, the community pillar became an object of community loathing. Mr. Atchison, 53, was arrested getting off a plane in Detroit on Sept. 16 and charged with the unthinkable. The authorities there said he was carrying a doll and petroleum jelly, and that he had arranged with an undercover agent to have sex with a 5-year-old girl.

Now Mr. Atchison is awaiting trial in a federal prison in Michigan, and the people of Gulf Breeze, an affluent bayside suburb in the Florida Panhandle, are outraged, baffled and repulsed.

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Dan Anderson for The New York Times

Edwin A. Eddy, city manager of Gulf Breeze, said he interacted with Mr. Atchison, a prosecutor, over the years. Mr. Eddy asks himself, "Should I have been able to see something?"

"He had an excellent reputation," said Barry Berozet, a criminal defense lawyer in Pensacola who has known Mr. Atchison for 15 years. "He was very businesslike and appeared to be a very good man, no question about it."

Ronald Johnson, a defense lawyer in Pensacola who has worked with Mr. Atchison, described him as "fairly intellectual," adding, "Sometimes he was a little eccentric, but nothing perverted or weird. Just a little different."

Pressed, Mr. Johnson could not elaborate. In fact, no one could describe Mr. Atchison in a way that transcended generalities. In interviews around this town of 6,450, the

phrase "nice guy" came up a lot. Edwin A. Eddy, the city manager, said he was "no more charismatic than anybody else" and "not any quieter or more gregarious than anyone else."

Mr. Eddy said he had scoured his memory for any clue that Mr. Atchison, who he said seemed "as straight as they come," was not.

"I constantly think about all the interactions I had with Mr. Atchison over the years," said Mr. Eddy, who coached softball with him, "and I think, 'Should I have been able to see something?'"

What the authorities saw in the Internet sting operation that led to Mr. Atchison's arrest was a man who led a second life as "fldaddy04," the moniker on a Yahoo profile traced to him. "I adore everything about young girls," the profile says, "how they talk, think, act, walk, look."

The police in Michigan said Mr. Atchison had been chatting online for two weeks with an undercover detective for the Macomb County Sheriff's Department, who posed as a mother offering to let men have sex with her young daughter. When she expressed concern that sex could injure the girl, according to court documents, Mr. Atchison responded, "I'm always gentle and loving; not to worry; no damage ever; no rough stuff ever ever."

He added, "I've done it plenty."

People here found that statement especially chilling, though the Gulf Breeze Police Department said that so far, no one here has come forward with accusations of abuse.

"There's so many unanswered questions," said Deputy Police Chief Robert Randle. "So many people had children involved with him. But unless somebody steps forward and lodges a complaint, we have nothing to go on."

Mr. Atchison has worked at the small United States Attorney's Office in Pensacola since the 1980s, most recently handling asset forfeitures in criminal cases as an assistant United States attorney. In one high-profile case, Mr. Atchison oversaw the government seizure of a popular beach bar at the center of a cocaine-trafficking ring.

His is considered one of the most conservative United States attorney's offices in the country, known for refusing plea agreements and seeking the stiffest sentences.

Mr. Johnson said Mr. Atchison was close with the other prosecutors in his office, going with some on an annual lobster-diving trip in the Florida Keys. A big white fishing boat sat in his otherwise-empty driveway this week. His interests, according to the Yahoo profile that the police said was his, include "surfing, skiing, diving, boating, young girls, petite girls, skinny girls."

The [F.B.I.](#), which is working with Macomb County in the investigation, said that in one of his last e-mail exchanges with the undercover agent, Mr. Atchison told her to tell her



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daughter that "you found her a sweet boyfriend who will bring her presents."

Mr. Atchison has pleaded not guilty to charges of traveling across state lines to have sex with a child under 12, using the Internet to entice a minor and traveling to another state to engage in illicit sex. He could face life in prison if convicted.

He tried to hang himself with a bed sheet in his jail cell last week after assuring his lawyer and a judge that he would not harm himself.

The lawyer, James C. Thomas of Detroit, did not return a call seeking comment. The F.B.I. is continuing its investigation, and Mr. Atchison's trial is scheduled to start Nov. 27.

One night this week, as evening fell on the broad playing fields at Shoreline Park, down the road from Mr. Atchison's house, several parents expressed shock at Mr. Atchison's arrest as their children kicked soccer balls, threw passes and learned cheerleading stunts.

Richard McLeod, a father of two, said he had asked his 6-year-old daughter if she recognized Mr. Atchison's photo to quell fears about her safety. She did not.

"They ought to torch this guy," Mr. McLeod said.

Holly Cook, a homemaker who was watching her two sons, 3 and 1, at the park earlier in the day, wondered aloud whether the local sports association should psychologically screen coaching candidates from now on, but concluded it would be impractical.

"Coaches put in tons of time," Ms. Cook said. "How can you ask them to take a psychological evaluation on top of that?"

Mr. Eddy said that while parents sometimes asked that their children not be assigned to certain coaches in the sports program, none had ever complained about Mr. Atchison, who was also president of the Gulf Breeze Athletic Association.

"Nobody ever had any negative comments," Mr. Eddy said. "Nobody ever said, 'Anybody but this guy.'"

Around town, praise flowed for Mr. Atchison's wife, Barbara, who teaches anatomy at Gulf Breeze High School but took a leave of absence after his arrest. She won the town's teacher-of-the-year award in 2004. Several people said she was as stunned as anyone by the news.

"She's shellshocked," said Deputy Chief Randle, who went with F.B.I. agents to execute a search warrant on the Atchison home, where they seized at least one computer. "She's just floored."

Randy Sansom, an accountant whose youngest child, like Mr. Atchison's, is a senior at the high school, said townspeople were determined to support Mrs. Atchison and her three children, two of whom are away at college.

"We are here to be their friends and pray for them and know they had nothing to do with this," Mr. Sansom said. "They are victims as well."

*Terry Aguayo contributed reporting from Miami, and Mari Krueger, from Gulf Breeze, Fla.*

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