

THE PARK

EARLY ON A COOL, GRAY EVENING IN CENTRAL PARK, ONE WEEK before the murder, two clusters of boys entered the Sheep Meadow from opposite ends, east and west. They strolled toward one another. On a boom box, Biggie Smalls was playing: “Kick in the doorway, then the .44, all you heard was ‘Papa, don’t hit me no more’ . . .” ■ From the west came three members of the Central City Lords, a crew of older teenagers who

once ran the park but have now moved on. From the east came three of the East Coast Vandals, mostly ninth-graders from better private schools. Trailing after the ECVs, as usual, was a scrawny, olive-skinned boy in oversize pants, dangling a wallet chain. Chris Vasquez.

The crew members—unlike Chris, all wearing North Faces, Hillfiger, and Polo—gathered around the rock, nodding to each other coldly. They had beef to discuss, just some B.S. involving a robbery. Darryl, one of CCL's members—African-American, 17—says he was already annoyed at having to meet up and politick with what he considered a “bunch of little rich punks.” Now he saw that among them was someone totally unworthy of the proceedings.

Darryl cocked his head at Chris Vasquez: “What is this pussy nigga doing here?”

According to Darryl and his boys, one of the ECVs responded flatly: “He’s not down with us.”

“He just got robbed by my man,” Darryl said, frowning.

The ECV members shifted uncomfortably. While they did let Chris chill with them—they now say he “wasn’t a bad kid,” he was a little too “weird” to let into their circle officially—they had had to warn him, a couple of weeks before, to stop telling people he was in their crew. “He tried to be down with us,” said Lcee, another ECV member, 15, “but we wouldn’t let him.”

“Why are you saying this?” Chris Vasquez exploded. “Why are you doing this to me?”

It was strange; Chris didn’t usually say anything. This made the ECV kids seem even more uneasy. They were supposed to be talking business; they were representing in front of an older crew.

“If you’re gonna be down with us, you have to keep it real, Chris,” said Lcee. Chris protested: “You’re my boys.”

“SHE’D WALK ALONG DOING THE HOMEBOY ROLL. SHE WAS ALL ‘YO’ THIS AND ‘CHILLIN’ THAT. SHE WAS TAKING THE HOODLUM-GUY THING TO THE EXTREME.”

Chad, 15, one of ECV’s leaders, just sneered. “If you wanted to be down with us,” he told Vasquez, according to three boys present, “you’d have to rob somebody. You’d have to catch a body.”

“It never happened,” Chad says now. “They were serious,” says Darryl. “They did it to gas up their crew.”

ECV turned away from Chris and went about their business. The boy stood there, out of the circle, stone-faced.

After about ten minutes, he turned and walked out of the Sheep Meadow alone.

ONE WEEK LATER, ACCORDING TO POLICE, CHRIS VASQUEZ, PERHAPS with the help of his friend Daphne Abdela, stabbed a hunting knife into the arms, neck, back, and chest of a 44-year-old real-estate agent named Michael McMorrow. The killing occurred under a quaint Chinese gazebo, in the shadow of the stately apartment buildings on Central Park West, where Daphne lived. Daphne told police that she and Chris then mutilated the body, cutting off the dead man’s nose and almost severing a hand in an apparent attempt to hide his identity. They tried to sink Mc-

Many of the names in this story have been changed.

Morrow’s 220-pound frame in the park’s lake, gutting it first, Daphne told police, “because he was a fatty.”

In the weeks since, the event has drawn international coverage, much of it focusing on the question of privilege: How did two 15-year-old preppies become suspects in a murder?

The makings of an answer lie in the teenage underworld that has taken hold of many of the city’s private schools in recent years. To be a high-school student in New York today is to have to come to terms with a world of crews—teenage gangs in which

committing crimes is the path to popularity and where stealing, scheming, fighting, and drug dealing go on as matter-of-factly as playing field hockey or attending French club. This is a time in New York when kids from the most privileged families refer to each other as “slaves,” “gangsta bitches,” “hoods”—a lexicon lifted from hip-hop. When ECV told Chris Vasquez to “keep it real,” they were asking him to reach for an identity that was clearly foreign to their own rich Upper East Side upbringings, but to which they, too, were aspiring.

“We also stand for Encouraging Child Violence,” says Chad, of ECV.

The crew started a year ago. Over spring break, about eight friends who went to private schools like Beekman, Wagner, and Loyola, and wrote graffiti together, decided to unite as brothers. When a tougher crew on the East Side—Hoods for Life, or HFL—noticed their fighting mettle and decided to get their back, ECV gained power. Now, they claim 60 to 70 members, “from all different boroughs,” they say, “all different races.”

“The papers got us wrong,” says Chad. “We don’t go around robbing people from the projects.” “Of course not,” says a 16-year-old girl in the Double-Nine Crew, or DNC. “They want to

with you," says one of Chris's best friends, Daniel, a Loyola student, 15.

"People said, 'Why you hanging out with him?' " says Chad. "But he was always like, 'Where are you going?' And you couldn't tell him to leave, 'cause he's like a good kid. He was a nice kid. He was too nice; he bothered us."

Chris was a Herb: a loser, a weakling, someone who has trouble handling himself or being natural, someone who's weird. He was from uptown, the Nineties, from an Irish-Puerto Rican family. He was an altar boy at Saint Francis de Sales Roman Catholic Church. He didn't have the money for cool clothes, and he didn't have the street credentials to be thought of as a tough kid.

On top of that, Chris was struggling with a psychological problem. Something awful happened to him in third grade—some say it was his parents' divorce that made him unstable, but, among kids, there has been a long-standing rumor that he was molested by a stranger. One day, when he was still a student at Loyola, Chris got up and walked out of the classroom, suffering an acute anxiety attack. Similar episodes would recur throughout his schooling. "In fifth grade," says Daniel, "he told me one time he felt he couldn't breathe. He burst out of the door and ran across the street to [the Regis School], where his mother worked" as a secretary.

Chris was diagnosed with agoraphobia and put on Zoloft, an antidepressant, as well as the sedative Lorazepam. A smart boy, he was eventually sent to Beekman, a less competitive school, and put on a special schedule to accommodate his fears of the classroom, just 12:30 to 3 P.M. Singled out as a strange kid, "he was hassled by people in school," Daniel says.

"Up until third grade, he was loud, he had balls," says Lcee. "I had beef with him back then and actually fought him. I beat the fuck out of him, but he stood up for himself." And then Chris "became scared of the world."

As he got older, he became an easy target for the muggings and beatings that go on in the after-school hours on side streets, parks, and trains on the Upper East and Upper West sides. "Herbs get robbed, that's one of their functions," says Pete, 18, a crew member who admits to having robbed Chris himself.

be down with kids from the projects. They would never rob kids they sweat."

But ECV claims they don't rob anybody, that they're just a chilling crew, "friends hanging out who wanted a name." Among kids, however, they're known for cruising around in large groups and picking on people—beating up on other private-school students. "They beat up on little kids in the Meadow," says Seamus, a CCL member, 17. "They come twenty at a time with their video camera"—apparently to get footage of their fights to send to an obscure cable-access show about crew life called "Temple of Intoxication," which is produced by the head of BAF, or Blunts and Forties, an Irish street kid and crew icon named Lash. "They all want to be on Lash's show. Lash is like the emperor to them."

"I don't know why they want to be gangsters," Seamus, a lower-class kid from the Bronx, adds. "They haven't been through half the stuff we been through."

For some 15-year-olds, however, ECV has a harsh glamour. It did for Chris Vasquez. He wanted to be a part of the group so much he often followed them around in a fantasy that he was a member. He wasn't. One night, around two months ago, ECV "threw down" a few kids on the street, inviting them to join the crew. Chris, who was nearby, misunderstood and thought the invitation included him, too.

More than once, ECV had to set him straight, to get him to stop telling his friends that he was down with them. "We didn't like how he acted," says Chad. "He didn't really act like anything. There was no use to him."

Most kids describe Chris Vasquez as a "quiet, nice guy." "Not in a million years could you see him doing something like what he did. He was just kind of there," says Puck, another ECV member, 15. "I can see him walking with his hands in his pockets, looking down, minding his own business. Smoking Newports. He didn't say much. He didn't have a lot of friends."

"He fended for attention," says another ECV member, Strobe, 15. "If people were having a conversation, he'd come over and try to get in it." "He was the kind of guy who, if he knew you were going to be somewhere, he would be there first to make sure to meet up

Chris was getting it from both sides, harassed both by students and the kids in his own neighborhood. "His neighborhood is totally different from ours," says Dutchie, 15, a friend of Chris's. "Ghetto kids from uptown jump on the train and wait for a kid like Chris Vasquez. He also had to deal with them."

Chris was trying to fit in with crew life, but in his own meek way. He started carrying a lighter that had a skull and a scythe on it. He tried his hand at graffiti—his tag was ACID; but he wasn't a successful writer. "He had two ups," tags, "on Park Avenue," says Dutchie, "but they're gone now."

The attacks on him took their toll. "He felt he was under a lot of stress at all times," says Daniel. "He was shook, very nervous, he was paranoid like crazy," says Houston, 15, a classmate at Beekman. "Once I came up to him to give him the pound"—a handshake—"and he just jumped in the air."

He made some kids nervous. "He was kind of a psycho," says

wasn't drunk more often than other people," says Chad, "just, when he was drunk, he was drunker. And he never said a word."

AMONG THE WANNA-BE THUGS WHO SWING BACKPACKS ALONG MADISON Avenue, girls occupy a central but subordinate place. Girls don't, for the most part, have their own crews, and so they're left to try to win entry into a world that will never really accept them; the price is often sex. Girls win respect, of a kind, through being "shysty," deceitful and manipulative—willing to steal, say, or run a credit-card scam with a stolen card. In a world run by brash, swaggering boys, girls are referred to as "shook ones"—sluts—or "chickenheads"—silly, flirty, hangers-on.

Daphne Abdela wasn't ever considered a chickenhead; she made it known that she looked down on such girls. "She was against what a lot of the girls do, dressing up for the guys," says Dutchie, a close friend of Daphne's. "She felt like she was above

"YOU COULDN'T TELL HIM TO LEAVE, 'CAUSE HE'S LIKE A GOOD KID," SAYS A MEMBER OF ECV. "HE WAS A NICE KID. HE WAS TOO NICE; HE BOTHERED US."

Dutchie. ECV has among its many videotapes of its members a brief shot of Chris: He is standing in the background at the scene of a fight, and all of a sudden, he starts jumping up and down as if on an invisible pogo stick.

"Even with a little bit to drink, he could go fairly crazy," says Daniel. "He would go hyper and jump around." "But he wasn't a violent drunk," says Chad. "He didn't like violence," says Lcee. "Sometimes when we were fighting he tried to break it up."

But Daniel, who knew Chris best, says his friend could become violent. "He would scream in your face when he was drunk, or he would punch things."

It was only a short time before the murder that Chris appears to have begun drinking heavily. Kids started to see him nursing beer, hanging out on the FDR overpass in the Seventies. "He

those girls who try to be social. I could see her, like, shaking her head and rolling her eyes," says a drinking buddy, Vader, 16.

Daphne made her own way. "She hung out with the guys," Dutchie says. "She was a guy," says Sam, 15, an acquaintance from the Dwight School. "A friend of mine once grabbed her chest," says another boy, "to make sure she had breasts." Daphne turned around and walloped the kid.

Short and chubby, Daphne acted like a guy because she wouldn't, perhaps couldn't, play the part of a popular girl. "She was trying to be a thug," says Josh, 15, an old classmate from Columbia Prep. Daphne could often be seen waltzing through her favorite haunt, Carl Schurz Park, in a Tommy Hilfiger jacket, flannel shirt, boots. "She dressed like a gangsta bitch," says Sam. Her style was uncommon among private-school girls, who are more typically outfitted in seductive gear like shiny shirts and tight black pants. "She'd walk along doing the homeboy roll, her fists clenched when she walked," says Will, 17, an acquaintance from Collegiate. "She was all 'yo' this and 'chillin' that. She was taking the hoodlum-guy thing to the extreme."

Since the murder, it has been widely reported that Daphne drank and used drugs; in that, at least, she fit right in. When classes are over each day, kids fan out over the city in search of "weed spots," or places to buy pot, and liquor stores that accept shady I.D.'s. Then they retreat to the parks, brownstone stoops, and free cribs, apartments with no parents. Daphne and one of her several bands of drinking buddies favored the grassy mound behind the Metropolitan Museum. The guys there accepted her because, again, unlike a chickenhead, she didn't want to flirt; she wanted to get wasted. "When we chill as guys," says Vader, "it's all about getting fucked up, and she just wanted to get fucked up like us."

But even her guy friends were surprised and eventually alarmed at the extent of Daphne's intake. "She bought a bag [of pot] every day," says Dutchie. "She drank every day. She drank all the time. She'd go out at lunch and get drunk, smoke before school, in the middle of school, and she went into school tripping a lot. I don't know that many girls that go to school always fucked up."

"One time she was doing 'ludes between classes

and she passed out and pissed on herself," says Vader. Others recall a time outside Carl Schurz Park when Daphne, so drunk she was unaware of what she was doing, pulled down her pants in front of everyone and peed on the sidewalk.

Daphne was well-off, even by the high standards of the attendees of Manhattan private schools. Her father, Angelo Abdela, an Israeli, is a senior vice-president of CPC International, a global food-services company that owns Entenmann's. Daphne would often pass around boxes of cookies and cupcakes. Kids were impressed by the duplex apartment with the terrace and elevator where she lived, in the Majestic building on Central Park West. The family even had a driver.

She always carried plenty of money—\$100, \$200, more—and she was willing to share it with classmates. "She had mad cheddar," says Darryl, "and she would smoke heads"—get people high. "She used to buy me things after school, take me to McDonald's," Josh says.

Her cash didn't come only from her parents. "She had a couple of friends downtown who would give her money if she asked," Daniel says. "Like this one, a Pakistani guy who worked in a building on 40-something street," says Whitney, Daphne's best girl friend, 17. "He sold fake Gucci watches. He gave me one. He would give Daphne 150 bucks." Several other kids who knew Daphne report accompanying her to meet up with "the Pakistani guy"—a man in his late thirties or forties with a mustache, wearing polo shirts, who called himself "Max"—to get watches or sunglasses, or to watch Daphne get money from him. "She was showing off about it a little bit, I guess," says Lcee. "It was like, see, I have the illest connects in the world."

Daphne, her friends say, would "deliver packages" for Max, and most people assumed they contained drugs. He compensated her not only with money and gifts for her friends but also with rides. "One time he had his friend who drove a cab drive us around everywhere. He drove us uptown to get weed, and then he drove us downtown to Kinko's. He drove us everywhere we wanted," says Whitney.

The building where Max is said to work, in the Forties on Broadway, is a short distance from a couple of Times Square video arcades frequented by private-school kids; inside, the stairwell is festooned with ECV tags.

Sex was one possible explanation for why Max took care of Daphne. "That's what everyone thought, but I don't think it was happening," says Whitney. "The whole thing made absolutely no sense to me." "I asked her to explain, but she said, 'Don't worry about it,'" says Lcee.

DAPHNE HAD ALSO STARTED STEALING, SEVERAL friends say. "She stole this girl's camera from her house," says Flint, an ECV member, 15. "She had enough money to buy a million cameras." And Daphne may have been dealing drugs. "She told me she was trying to deal weed," Josh says. Most significantly, Daphne was seeking out the company of adults, older men whose friendship she seemed to feel would afford her an aura of danger and glamour. "She said, 'I hang out with older guys, I hang out in bars and guys buy me drinks, I've hung out with kids who have shot people,' all that stuff," says Sam, who didn't quite believe all he was hearing. He adds, "That was her way of trying to be down."

When she talked about such things, kids just thought she was

crazy. Dutchie says, "I kind of think that's why she killed the guy. Because she kept going down and down in her life—she didn't have a lot to look forward to. She knew she was going down. She didn't give a fuck about anything."

Freshman year had been hard for both Daphne and Chris. Daphne had been popular when she first entered Loyola, but then, Whitney says, "everything started deteriorating for her. At first everyone looked up to her because she smoked cigarettes and was the head of her clique." There were four other girls in the group; they can be seen in their yearbook with Daphne, sitting on a rock on a trip to Bear Mountain. Daphne stands on top, apart somehow, looking pensive.

Being Miss Popularity was a new thing for her, and it didn't last long. The hood mentality that at first brought her props—or respect—soon started to scare people. The pivotal moment came at a Christmas party last year when Daphne, who showed up extremely drunk, punched a girl in the face "for no apparent reason whatsoever," says Daniel. "That," Whitney says, "was when it all started hitting the fan."

"These girls started to look at her as . . . not good enough for them," says Whitney carefully. "People got scared because they weren't moving as fast as she was moving."

Daphne's parents were increasingly at a loss as to how to control her, resorting to calling 911 at night when she missed her curfew. Then, in February, they sent her to a Westchester rehab center called Arms Acres. It was there that Daphne met Michael McMorrow, a lonely 44-year-old who had something in common with her: drinking. The extent of their interaction inside the program isn't known. "I heard she was going out with him," says Sam; but other friends say it's unlikely. "She called me every day from there," says Daniel. "They were trying to pin her drinking problems on not having her birth parents around, and she actually started to believe it."

When she returned from Arms Acres, the Abdelas were apparently encouraging Daphne to contact her birth parents. But the hunt didn't seem to ease her problems. Two weeks before the murder, after a series of episodes, she was asked to leave Loyola. The school was having her take her final exams at home, and her mother and father were planning to send her away to boarding school, perhaps to one in Massachusetts. "I think her parents just wanted her to (continued on page 81)

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go away somewhere," Daniel says, "where she couldn't do all the things she was doing in the city." With all her friends in school, and on pins and needles waiting to hear where she was going next, "She had nothing to do, that's why she was out so late at night," says Dutchie. "That's why she was going crazy."

WHILE DAPHNE WAS GETTING INTO TROUBLE, Chris Vasquez was trying to duck it; but as always he was having a hard time. A week before the murder, he was apparently jumped on the No. 6 train by about six kids from the Wagner. They stole his money, ECV kids say, and "beat him down." "He asked us to help him go find them," says Shorty, another member of ECV, "but we didn't know who they were, we didn't know what they looked like." And anyway, as they had recently made it abundantly clear to Chris, he wasn't "down" with them.

It was not until after he was robbed on the train that Chris started carrying the hunting knife that allegedly killed Michael McMorrow. Chris had collected knives; the police found several in his bedroom. But he had never toted a weapon on a regular basis before. When ECV failed to "get his back"—fight for him—after the most recent attack, then perhaps it sunk in that he was, indeed, without a crew, and that if he didn't defend himself, no one would.

He seemed stressed out. "I know an easy place to get liquor," says Daniel, "and he was always like, Do you want to go there? He was starting to become an alcoholic pretty quickly."

When Daphne and Chris met, in Central Park, just a few weeks before the murder, they were drawn to each other, but the relationship was never romantic. They quickly became "chilling" companions, meeting up after school and heading out into the parks, Central or Carl Schurz, to drink forties and smoke blunts together. Their brief friendship seems to have been based, in part, on a mutual feeling of rejection. "I think he thought she was cool because she did whatever she wanted, she didn't give a fuck what anybody thought, not even her parents," says Dutchie. For Daphne, Chris may have been a new fan club of one. "Chris was ostracized," says Vader. "To chill with him, there must have been something about Daphne that felt ostracized too. And like, this guy that they killed was also a weirdo."

Kids do think it's weird that Michael McMorrow was drinking beer with Daphne and Chris late at night, or any

time. "I've seen older people try and do that," says a Columbia Prep student, Jay, 16. "They buy beer for you or whatever and they have no friends, so they try and latch on to you, but you don't let them. If you're a kid you don't want to hang out with a 40-year-old."

But from a recent account in the *New York Times*, it appears that Daphne was the one who approached McMorrow first. "Hi, remember me? . . . Daphne from rehab?" McMorrow, who lived with his aged mother, was by all accounts a mild, sweet man with an abiding drinking problem. He often sat in Strawberry Fields at night reading the newspaper under the lamps. Eventually McMorrow would make his way over to the group of adults he hung out with on a small lawn to the north of the Meadow. McMorrow felt at home with this tipsy crowd of homeless people and assorted characters—but there were rarely, if ever, kids there.

"He would show up roaring drunk," says Mickey, a retired Vietnam vet who knew McMorrow well. "But he would never be violent. He would make you laugh and then he would make you laugh some more. Somebody would say something and he would point at them and shout, 'Madness! Has the whole world gone mad?'" Mickey pulls out a picture of a midnight popcorn party the group had several months ago. McMorrow sits slumped over on a bench in a baseball cap, beer in hand, smiling sadly.

Some reports have speculated that Daphne and Chris dropped acid the night of the murder. McMorrow had been arrested five times on drug charges. A source close to the case says the dead man sold acid. "So what?" his buddy Mickey snaps. "I sell a little weed on the side myself."

AROUND 3 P.M. ON THE DAY OF THE MURDER, Daphne ran up to two older boys at Madison Avenue and 82nd Street. "Yo, Will, I'm Daphne, remember me? Can you get me a forty and Phillies? . . ."

Will and his friend Pino, 20, agreed to go into a nearby deli and buy Daphne Phillies, cigars for rolling blunts in; and forties, 40-ounce bottles of beer.

"I was like, 'Wow, you're really cool,'" Will says he told Daphne sarcastically, handing her the change. "I don't drink forties at three o'clock."

But Daphne had been drinking, her classmates say, since noon that day. "Word," she slurred, ignoring Will's tone. "I can't wait to get fucked up."

"I saw them on Thursday, around 4 p.m., in Carl Schurz Park," says Lcee. "They were drinking. They were over by

the benches down by the basketball court. Daphne was trying to get with her ex-boyfriend, Nick. She was in love with him, this white kid with slicked-back hair. Daphne fell in love with him. Nick broke up with her—he kept breaking up with her. 'Nick, don't you like me, you have a problem with me?' she was saying. Chris was just over there drinking and eating Pringles. Chris didn't care."

CHRIS AND DAPHNE ARE THE ONLY ONES who know how the rest of the night unfolded. Daphne's lawyer, Benjamin Braffman, is already distancing her from the murder, calling for separate trials, even suggesting his client wasn't present when Michael McMorrow was killed. Chris's attorney, Arnold Kriss, has suggested that Chris acted in self-defense.

Among private-school kids, the case is now a constant source of conversation. Many say that if, as Daphne claimed in her initial meeting with police, McMorrow came on to her, then they would feel it entirely justified of Chris to kill him. "If I was in the park with a girlfriend and some weird fat man started touching her, I would do that," says a 15-year-old crew member, Tommy. "Anybody here would."

"I wouldn't kill him—I would fuck with him, I would hit him," says Will. "I'd kill him," says Sam. "It would be fun."

But many kids also say they don't believe anything sexual precipitated the murder. Looking at it through the lens of crew life, they see a robbery gone wrong as a more likely scenario. "They were trying to rob the guy, straight up," speculates Pete, "and he reacted and it got out of hand."

Daphne admitted to police that she did, in fact, rob McMorrow, taking his money out of his wallet. Friends of McMorrow's in the park say that, often when drunk, he would nod off. "Say he woke up and said, 'What are you doing, you little punks?'" says Seamus. "Whatever they tried to do, McMorrow was a big guy—he could have given them a good fight."

Another crew member, Sharif, 19, has a different take on the killing: "It's always those people who get harassed and picked on who flip the fuck out."

One day last week, Daphne called her friend Whitney from the Spofford Juvenile Center. "I said, 'What the hell happened?'" says Whitney. "And she said, 'Look, I'm not allowed to talk about it.' Then I told her I was going to write a letter to Chris to tell him he was in my prayers, and she told me those two are, like, competing against each other. She said it's her versus him now." ■