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Family on collision course before murders

ALLENTOWN, Pa. (AP) — When two of their sons shaved their heads and started spouting neo-Nazi hate, Dennis and Brenda Freeman did what they could.

They sought counseling, institutionalized their sons. Finally, they threw out the boys' hate literature and sold the car they used to travel 800 miles to Michigan for meetings with other skinheads.

Five days later, they and their youngest son were dead — battered and stabbed.

"You never know when you're going to die," 11-year-old Erik Freeman had told an aunt two days before he was bludgeoned unrecognizable in his bed, a police affidavit said.

On Wednesday, two days after the bodies were discovered, Bryan Freeman, 17, and his 16-year-old brother, David, were arrested in a rural Michigan home along with a cousin, Nelson Birdwell III, who police believe was in the home during the murders. The brothers were each charged with three counts of homicide and conspiracy and jailed without bail, and Birdwell was jailed under \$150,000 bail on car theft and probation violation charges.

In the police affidavit, neighbor Joshua Wirth said Bryan told him "he would have killed his parents for selling the car" if he had been awake.

"The parents and the son knew this was going to happen," said Lehigh District Attorney Robert Steinberg. "They just didn't know where this was

going to happen." Nevertheless, there was little the parents or authorities could do to prevent the tragedy, he said.

"The family was obviously not willing to give up hope," he said. "Maybe they should have. Maybe it would have saved their lives. But you're dealing with a 16- and 17-year-old. Just because their conduct escalates, you as a parent can't say, 'I'm not going to try.'"

There is no doubt they tried. The parents sought help from at least eight different clinics and organizations. Brenda took courses in family counseling. They put the boys in residential treatment — where Bryan attacked his father and met another skinhead youth.

"In the conversations I had with Mrs. Freeman the entire focus was 'help for my kids,' it was not help for Brenda Freeman," said one counselor who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Dennis, 54, and Brenda, 48, were devout, lifelong members of the Jehovah's Witnesses. They met when Dennis came to speak to Brenda's congregation, and lived for a time across the street from the local Kingdom Hall.

Initially, their sons shared their devotion.

"Bryan was an excellent public speaker," said grandfather Nelson Birdwell. "When he was 10, he put a lot of the adults to shame."

Birdwell believes the family's troubles began four years ago

when Dennis became involved in a disagreement at the church.

"It was something of a personal nature between Dennis and his peers. The boys became aware of this and they lost respect for their father," Birdwell said. "The boys respect strength."

An elder with the congregation, who also spoke on condition of anonymity, said Bryan and David stopped coming to meetings at about that time. But he blamed their interest in heavy metal music.

"There had to be an outside influence," he said. "Brother Freeman did his best in raising the children in their beliefs."

Birdwell also said there were problems with drugs and alcohol. Steinberg said there was at least one arrest for underage drinking.

When the boys returned from residential treatment to school two years ago, classmates noticed a change. Once neatly dressed in ties, they started wearing engineer boots, black jeans and T-shirts reading "Eternal Hatred." They talked of Satanism, and increasingly, of racial hatred and violence.

"They were real quiet, real mellow people who wouldn't bother no one," said classmate Dana Hersch, who knew them since childhood.

"Then they started to be more aggressive with their words," she said. "They started saying skinheads were the right ones in the world. They said one day they were going to come and kill all the black people."

Troubles escalated at home.

Allen Stiles, police chief of Salisbury Township, said police were called to the Freemans' two-story home at least five times over the past two years. No charges were brought.

Birdwell said the boys began sneaking out, driving to Michigan and Atlantic City, N.J., to meet other skinheads.

"There was complete disorder in the household," he said.

By last December, the family seemed on a collision course. Bryan showed up with a tattoo on his neck of a swastika made from human bones. Three weeks ago David, an imposing 6-foot-3, 245 pounds, had "Sieg Heil!" etched above his eyebrows. Bryan, 6 feet and 215 pounds, tattooed "Berzerker" on his forehead.

The Thursday before the murders, Bryan was suspended from school for filling a standardized test with racist slogans and lewd drawings. The next day, in a lunchroom confrontation with school principal Michael Platt, students say Bryan snarled, "Shut up or I'll throw you in the oven, you kike!"

Police were called, but Bryan left before they arrived. Two days later, in the early hours of Monday morning, Dennis and Erik Freeman were bludgeoned and stabbed to death in their beds. Brenda Freeman was found beaten and stabbed in the basement.

"Sometime people just go bad," Steinberg said. "I have seen enough that I believe that there are some people who are either born evil or turn evil."

Student arrested for threats on Internet

YOUNGSTOWN, Ohio (AP) — A college student who posted stories on the Internet about torturing, raping and murdering a classmate believes he did nothing wrong, his family said.

Jake Baker, a 20-year-old student at the University of Michigan, was jailed without bond last month after he pleaded innocent to transmitting a threat over state lines, a federal felony. If convicted, he faces up to five years in prison.

Endeavor crew watches nova

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — Endeavour's astronauts aimed powerful ultraviolet telescopes Monday at a newly exploded star that is thousands of times brighter than it was before it burst.

Nova Aquilae erupted in a thermonuclear explosion a month ago. Before reaching this boiling point, the white dwarf star had been tugging material from its larger companion star and built up a layer of hot gas that eventually blew up and was hurled into space.

Scientists believe a new buildup of gas will start soon and that another outburst will occur thousands of years from now.

"Even though you just see a pinpoint of light, we can begin to interpret it in terms of drawing a three-dimensional picture of this event," said Arthur Code, an astronomer at the University of Wisconsin at Madison who's in charge of one of the shuttle telescopes.

Nova Aquilae is in the constellation Aquila, or Eagle, and is several thousand light years away.

Another nova erupted in late January and yet another just a little over a week ago. Both of these also will be viewed by the three ultraviolet tele-

scopes aboard Endeavour so astronomers can learn more about the life cycle of stars.

"We're incredibly lucky that we have three novae all in different stages of development," said University of Wisconsin astronomer Joni Johnson.

Astronomers have logged more than 100 observations since the 15-day mission began Thursday. They have some 600 targets from which to choose, including stars, galaxies, quasars, moons, and cosmic dust clouds.

"I'm delighted we can be at this state right now," said NASA scientist Charles Meegan. "We go from one to the next, just clipping right along."

There seemed to be just two problems.

The astronauts' exercise sessions caused slight vibrations that scientists feared could hamper the stargazing. The seven-member crew was asked to use the stationary cycle when the telescopes weren't focusing on objects.

Also, ground controllers were swamped trying to keep up with all the requests for mission information pouring into the "Welcome to Astro-2" program via the Internet.

Freshman Seminars Spring Term 1995

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- CRWR 199 Pop Prosody: Using Popular Lyrics to Refine the Practice of Versification
- PHYS 199 The Origin of Earth and its Inhabitants and the Search for Life in the Universe
- EDPM 199 Different Worlds in the Same Classroom
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