

# The Murder of a Boy Named GWEN



*She was seventeen and sexy and wanted to party. But something seemed off about Gwen Araujo – and when the guys found out her secret, things turned ugly fast*

HE LOOKED LIKE THE PERFECT COMPLEMENT TO ANOTHER night of getting wasted. Model-thin, with sultry eyes and pouty lips, Gwen Araujo carried herself a lot like her idol, Gwen Stefani. Plus, she wanted it. Jay and Mike Magidson could tell that in a second. It was the end of summer in Newark, California, an old mining town thirty-five miles southeast of San Francisco that had sprawled into a Silicon Valley suburb. The two

friends, dropouts from Newark Memorial High, had interrupted their twice-weekly game of dominoes to make a beer run. And there she was, all alone.

"Need a ride?" they hollered out the window of Mike's truck.

"I want to party," she told them.

She lied about her age, saying she was nineteen. She lied about her name, calling herself Lida. But as soon as they got back to the party house – a cramped, dingy tract home that their friend Jose Merel shared

**BY BOB MOSER**

with his two brothers – everybody knew she meant it about wanting to party. Humble as the house was, with its dorm-room atmosphere and stale-beer stench, the place was famous for its blowouts. Lida spent the rest of the night flirting with the guys, brushing up against them, firing them up. When they went out to the garage to smoke some weed, she gave them

power hits. Lips on lips, lungs to lungs. Oh, yeah – she definitely wanted it.

The only question was who would do her first. Jay, Mike and Jose had been waiting for years. Girls came and went, babies were born, jobs were lost, but nothing came between “the Three Stooges,” as Jay called them. They took genuine pride in being drunk, stoned and stupid. On April 20th, the Stooges joined the rest of America’s most dedicated potheads in a national daylong weedathon. Thursdays were always bar nights, when they would drop \$100 apiece on long-neck Coronas and shots of Patrón. “We got a high tolerance,” Jay boasted.

Jay thought Lida was hot, but he wasn’t going to have sex with her. The quietest and steadiest of the Stooges at twenty-two, he was already juggling two sideline squeezes while working construction jobs to support his girlfriend, Lisa, the mother of his two kids. That left Mike and Jose – “Dumb and Dumber,” Jay called them. Mike was a hyperactive white kid who got busted for public drunkenness and meandered from one lousy job to the next: a classic gangsta wanna-be, always listening to rap and talking a mile a minute. Jose – like Mike an ex-jock from Newark High – was training as an electrician to support his own out-of-wedlock baby.

That night, after fooling around with Lida, the Stooges went outside to smoke and take stock. There was no question she was hot – almost *too* hot, the way she was hanging on to everybody, talking at the top of her lungs. “I’ve never met a girl like that,” Jay said.

Jaron Nabors, a sweet-faced, foul-mouthed college student who’d been hanging out at the Merel house, took a drag on his cigarette and considered what Jay had said. Suddenly, a weird thought popped into his mind.

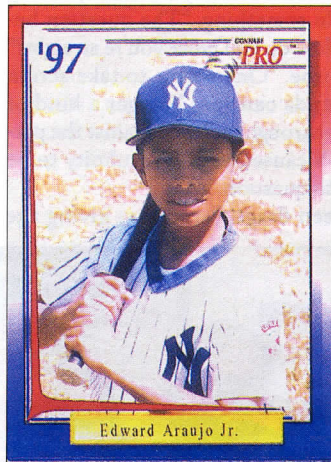
“Could this be a dude?” he asked.

He said it like a joke, but it got Jay going. “Hey, Mike,” he hollered. “Come over here, dude – you know about this kind of stuff.” Seems there’d been this story going around about Mike getting tricked by a girl in San Francisco. Said she was a girl but turned out to be a guy. So now they were all laughing at Mike. And the next minute, they were all laughing over what Jaron had said about Lida, because – nah, no way. A dude could never look that hot, right?

**T**HREE YEARS BEFORE, AT AGE fourteen, she had chosen Thanksgiving dinner to make an announcement to her family: From now on, the boy they knew as Edward Araujo Jr. would be living as a girl named Gwen. There were forty-some cousins to come out to, not to mention aunts and uncles and elderly relatives who believed in rosaries and mortal sin. Sure, they all knew Eddie had grown up playing football with his sister Pearl and getting teased home from school by kids hurling rocks and slurs. But here was Gwen, *ta-tum*, hair growing out, eyebrows in a per-



Sylvia Guerrero holds a photo of her slain daughter, Gwen, in front of the house where she was killed.



Edward Araujo Jr.



FROM EDDIE TO GWEN

As a young boy who liked to play with his sister’s dolls, Eddie (far left) knew he was different – and so did the girls. “Everybody had a feeling,” recalls his best friend. At fourteen, he decided to live as a girl (at far left) – and was soon getting taunted at school. Before long, Gwen dropped out and started partying and doing drugs.

fect arch like her mom’s, lipstick parting into the kind of smile that was often missing from Eddie’s repertoire.

“It turned out to be a beautiful moment,” recalls David Guerrero, an uncle who helped his sister Sylvia raise her four children after she divorced Edward Araujo Sr. “Everybody was hugging. Even older members of the family were OK with it.” Gwen’s mom was especially cool about it:

She and her new daughter went shopping for clothes, did their hair and makeup together, even talked about how big Gwen’s new breasts should be.

But kids and teachers at school were *not* OK with it. Gwen spent the next two years getting taunted and bullied and punished for using the girls’ bathroom before she finally dropped out. If school didn’t want her, fine. The hell with Newark,

where people were always staring, whispering, calling her a freak. She’d get up and save up for beauty school and have surgery to complete her transformation. “If she’d head for Hollywood, where no one would bat an eye at her – not unless she wanted her. “I’m going to do makeup like movie stars,” she told her mother. “I don’t know if I’m even going to have time for you – you’re going to have to call my secret

Gwen applied for a couple of jobs, one at Starbucks and the other at a grocery store, but both times her applications were mysteriously "lost." "She knew why it was happening," her mother says. "She knew." So Gwen threw her energy into what was left: parties, boys and makeup. She tried new looks, new personalities. Magenta hair, green hair, spiked hair, flowing hair. Her head swam with the Gwen Stefani lyrics she was addicted to:

*Magic's in the makeup  
But I want to be the real thing.*

After she met the Three Stooges, in the summer of 2002, Gwen became a welcome fixture at the Merel house. It wasn't long before Mike, Jose and Jose's brother Paul all had sex with her — always with her clothes on. She found ways to get to house parties all over the Bay Area, introducing herself sometimes as Gwen, sometimes Wendy, sometimes Lida. She was out of control, mouthier than ever, drinking and partying and God knew what else on a daily basis. Early one morning, her mom picked her up in an alleyway after some drunk guys found out she was a boy and cut her with a broken beer bottle. Sylvia, terrified, cried all the way home. "You need to be honest about who you are," she told Gwen. "I'm so worried about what's going to happen to you. My worst fear is that I'm going to wind up going into a morgue and identifying your body."

But Gwen didn't listen. Fooling around gave her what she needed most. "If you can make men want you, that means somebody is finally accepting you as legitimate, as a woman," says Danielle Castro, a transgendered friend of the family. "That becomes the most important thing in the world. You're not going to risk it by saying, 'Oh, by the way, I've got a dick.' Not when you're seventeen. But it's a dangerous game."

Very dangerous. More transgendered people are killed in hate crimes every year than all the other major targets combined — including blacks, Jews, Hispanics, lesbians and gay men. Most often, the victims are young transgendered women killed by men who've had sex with them. Sometimes the killers discover they've been misled and freak out. "They feel they had to do what they did," says forensic psychologist Karen Franklin, who interviews hate-

crime perpetrators. "They feel tricked. Their masculinity has been betrayed. They've had sex with a man!"

Other times the killers know they're having sex with a girl who's still a guy, at least in the anatomy department. "A lot of times, these murderers can't handle their own desires," says Shawna Virago, a transgender activist who works with Community United Against Violence, an anti-hate group in San Francisco. "They turn their anger on the victim rather than the society that is making them feel stigmatized by their own desires. And when they do, it gets ugly."

**T**HE STOOGES ENJOYED HAVING Lida around — who wouldn't? She was always doing stuff to get them worked up. One night she broke up their domino game by throwing the tiles all over the place, getting up on the table and rubbing herself while she danced. Paul's girlfriend, Nicole Brown, decided to egg her on. "Take your top off if you're gonna do that," she told Lida. The guys agreed, of course. "Yeah, we'll give you money if you take your top off," they whooped. Pissed off, Lida hopped down off the table and backhanded Nicole "pretty damn hard," Jay recalled. It escalated from there, with the two girls in a full-scale fistfight. Lida, petite as she was, surprisingly held her own. "Nicole was hurt," Jay said. "Her hair was fucked up and she had blood on her."

The guys didn't think much about it until a few days later, when Lida was off somewhere else. Mike started bragging about how she'd given him a blow job a couple of nights before. How she'd pulled her pants down but refused to take them all the way off. How she wanted him to do her from behind — *that way* — because she was having her period.

Jaron started giving Mike a hard time about how gross that was, anal sex. But then Jose chimed in. It turned out that Lida had told him the same thing, *done* the same thing, maybe two weeks before. A period couldn't last that long, could it?

They started comparing notes. How come Lida always wanted it from behind? Why wouldn't she let them touch her

breasts? Weren't her hands kind of rough for a girl? Didn't she always wear something over her neck, like maybe she was covering up an Adam's apple? And what about that fight with Nicole? Lida fought like — well, a guy.

This called for a blunt. They trooped off to the garage and lit up. For such a tight group of guys, this was a major mind-fuck. "It's like a fraternity," says Barrie Thorne, a sociologist at the University of California at Berkeley. "You get guys who are invested in being straight but whose bond includes physical and emotional closeness, a lot of homoerotic overtones. They police each other's masculinity." Being together was the one thing the Stooges could count on in their lives — and being together was all about being guys, drinking and smoking and fucking and telling dumb jokes. If Lida wasn't straight, did that mean that they weren't straight? And if they weren't straight, what were they?

Mike could laugh about the whole thing, but Jose couldn't let it rest. He had no patience with gays. God, what if this meant he was gay, too? Seeing Jose's discomfort, Mike

matter some serious thought. They agreed that if someone did this to that person would "get smoked." Jay always talking like that, trying to be like a mobster instead of an economist. But later, recounting the conversation to his girlfriend, Jaron reported the guys knew what they were going to do if Lida turned out to be a guy. "We were on a Tony Soprano-type plan to get the bitch and get rid of the body," Jaron

**I**T WAS STILL ON THEIR MINDS when they got together again a few days later, on the first Thursday in November. As usual, the guys spent the night cruising the local clubs, getting laid. Jay and Jose started out by stopping at a pool and downing a twelve-pack. They picked up Mike and Jaron and went to the Elephant Bar, an upscale joint with a jungle decor. Then came Club Merel, a down-and-dirty dance joint in a run-down strip mall where they knew the bartenders. After they closed the place down at 2 A.M., they headed back to Merel house to wind down with a

*Mike had "Lida" down on the carpet with his legs locked around hers. "Please don't," she gasped. "I have a family."*

couldn't resist needling him, rattling off all the reasons it seemed like Lida was a guy.

"You don't know for sure," Jaron pointed out.

But Jose was getting worked up. He glared at Mike. "Do you *want* to be gay?" he asked.

It was like a schoolyard taunt, daring Jose to do something. "The question becomes: How do you *prove* you're straight?" says Thorne. "One way is to take action your friends can see. You get a kind of catharsis through violence against the person who's caused your masculinity to be called into question."

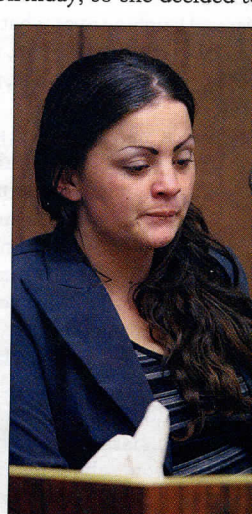
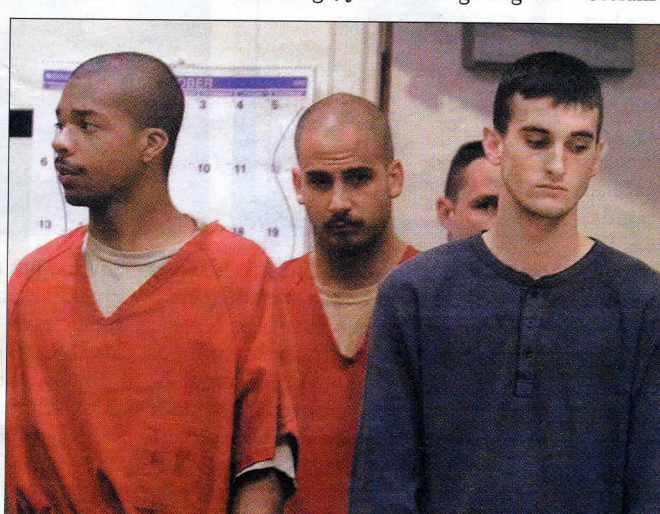
Between drags, Jaron was giving the

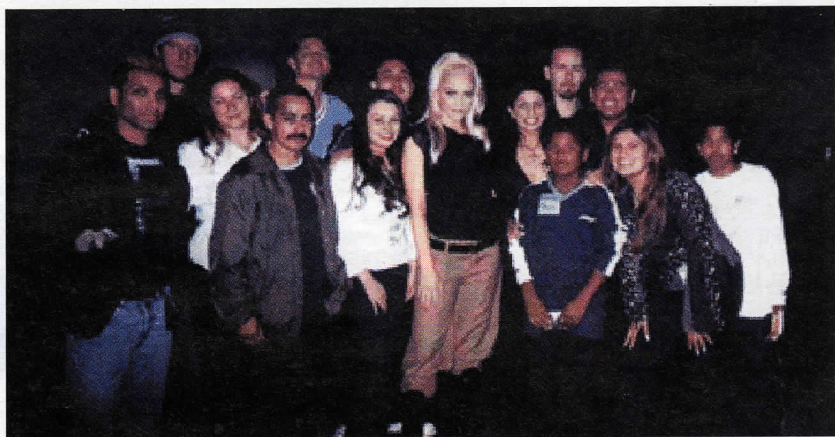
more beers, a joint or two — and Lida. Jose said she'd called the house earlier and would probably be over. "We can finally ask her about it," Mike said. "We can finally ask her about it. We won't have to guess anymore."

When they drove up to the Merel house, Lida was standing out front under a eucalyptus tree, smoking a cigarette. Nicole, high as a kite. Earlier that day, she'd done some crystal meth and downed a couple of forty-ounce beers, she'd decided to cut loose. In the past, to avoid detection, she had duct-taped her breasts to conceal her anatomy when she went to the party circuit. But that night was Gwen Stefani's birthday, so she decided to

## THE STOOGES STAND TRIAL

The "Three Stooges" — Jay Cazares (near right), Jose Merel and Mike Magidson (middle, at left and center) — spent their days smoking weed and fooling around with Gwen at their party house. "I've never met a girl like that," Jay said. Jaron Nabors (middle, at right) and Nicole Brown (far right) testified about what happened the night Gwen's secret came out.





**S**TEPHANIE BAUMANN, ONE OF Gwen's best friends, was in first-period economics when she got the news. "This girl in my group was telling another girl, 'I heard Gwen was missing.' And the other girl goes, 'Gwen?' The first girl says, 'She used to be Eddie in junior high.' I'm like, 'What?' I ran to the drama room and cried and cried. I was supposed to be rehearsing *The Laramie Project* that afternoon, but I couldn't do it. I couldn't deal."

Newark was already buzzing about the high school drama department's decision to stage the famous play about the hate-fueled murder of Matthew Shepard. "People were saying, 'Why don't you stick with *The Fantasticks*?' " recalls drama teacher Barbara Williams. "Nobody in Newark needed to see such things, they said. Partly because of our proximity to San Francisco, people like to assume that the town is a model of tolerance."

Stephanie loved the idea of the play, partly because of Gwen. They'd gotten tight back in seventh grade, when Gwen was still Eddie. "He was basically the class clown, I guess you'd say — always cracking jokes, very sarcastic," Stephanie recalls. "In eighth grade, he gave me a ring. He wanted us to be best friends. It's a silver ring with these bubbles on it. I've never taken it off. And that's when he told me his, I guess you'd say, sexual preference." Just before Gwen disappeared, the two friends had scored tickets to see their idol, Gwen Stefani, in concert. "God, we couldn't wait," Stephanie says.

Now rumors were flying around town, repeated in the hallways at school and the aisles at Big Lots: *A girl got butt-fucked at this three-day sex party, but then they found out it was a guy and killed her. Yeah, and twenty-five people were there, and they hung her up in the garage and beat her like a piñata.* The Stooges just kept partying like nothing had happened. On October 4th, the night after Gwen disappeared, they were back at it at the Merel house. "What happened to Lida?" Nicole asked Jay when she arrived that night.

"You don't want to know," he said.

But Jaron didn't know how to keep his mouth shut. Earlier that day, smoking a joint with his friend Adam Hewson, he had laid out the details of the murder. A week later, when Adam came over and brought

## THE IDOL

When Gwen was murdered, she and her friend Stephanie had tickets to see their hero, Gwen Stefani, in concert a month later. At the show, Stefani dedicated "Magic's in the Makeup" to Gwen — and then hosted her friends and family backstage (above).

up the subject again, Jaron was quick to incriminate himself. He never suspected that Adam was wearing a wireless mike, courtesy of the police. It turned out that Adam had repeated Jaron's story to a roommate — and word eventually got back to someone who happened to be related by marriage to one of Gwen's forty-some cousins. Her family ran down addresses, phone numbers and license plates, then handed the evidence over to the cops.

The next day, Jaron found himself back on Interstate 880, pointing the way northeast to Silver Fork, a rocky, remote campground in the mountains near Lake Tahoe. On the way, he retraced for the cops what happened after they killed Lida. How the four of them piled into Mike's truck, the body flung in back along with the shovels and pick. How they headed for Silver Fork because they had gone there as kids, and because Jay heard there was only one sheriff patrolling the whole vast wilderness up there. How they drove the four hours in near-total silence, making sure not to exceed the speed limit, until they finally climbed into the mountains and hung a right — *right here* — at Silver Fork Road. How they bumped farther and farther into the woods, until they were almost lost amid the cedar trees. How they fell into perfect sync as they dug a makeshift grave, everything quiet except for the wind and the whoosh of the nearby river. How you could hear Lida's body thud on the ground when they dragged it out of the back of the truck and flung it in the grave. How Jose broke the silence, saying, "I could kick her a couple more times, shit makes me so mad." How they threw rocks on top of the body and heaved a hollow tree trunk over the grave to make it look more natural. How, realizing that they were hungry, they hit the drive-through at the first McDonald's they spotted, just down the mountain in Placerville.

**B**Y THE TIME HER MUTILATED BODY was extracted from the rocks and dirt of Silver Fork, Gwen Araujo had already been transformed into a civil-rights martyr. Young and beautiful and murdered just outside the capital of queer America, she made the perfect poster child for a transgender-rights movement just beginning to gain recognition. In Newark, almost a thousand people attended her open-coffin funeral. "We had to put a turtleneck on her because the rope marks on her neck were all the way up to her chin," her mother recalls. In San Francisco, her death inspired a shrine honoring transgender victims of violence – including two more Bay Area residents who were murdered before Gwen's case went to trial. Activists sold Gwen T-shirts and CDs and raised money for a memorial fund. "She's become a sort of queer saint in the folk religion of my people," says Patrick Califia, a transgendered activist and author.

But in Newark, even Gwen's mourners weren't sure it was quite so simple. Joe Magdalena, a Newark High senior who wore angel wings to Gwen's funeral, says he can relate to the Three Stooges. "I could never see myself doing what those boys did," he says. "But I can kind of see from their mind-set, their homophobia, what they were doing." They thought having sex with Gwen made them gay – "and in their world, that'd basically be

death. That's the way they look at it."

The Stooges went on trial for first-degree murder last April. All three pleaded not guilty. For the first time, though, the three friends parted company. Jay, claiming it was "not my trip," insisted he was innocent of everything except helping to bury the body. Mike and Jose didn't deny that they had killed Gwen but claimed there was no premeditation involved – they just

to beat her and kill her?" Gwen's mother is even more blunt. "Murder is murder," Sylvia says. "A child is a child. This is an issue of humanity."

At the trial, Jaron pleaded guilty to manslaughter and testified against his friends in return for a reduced sentence of eleven years. Much of his grisly testimony was backed up by Nicole Brown and Jose's brothers Paul and Manny. The


*They thought having sex with Gwen made them gay – "and in their world," says a classmate, "that'd basically be death. That's the way they look at it."*

snapped because she deceived them. Their "deception defense" incensed many civil-rights advocates, who were reminded of the controversial "gay panic defense" used for years by the killers of gay men. "Nobody says they didn't have a right to be angry when they found out she had male anatomy," says Christopher Daley, co-director of the Transgender Law Center in San Francisco. "But does that mean they had a right

only one of the Stooges to take the stand was Jay, who might have been better off remaining silent. Far from showing remorse, he grinned and guffawed while describing his drunken capers with Jose and Mike. Asked to describe the murder, he offered a vague, cartoonish version that portrayed himself as Lida's protector and accused Jaron and Nicole of joining in the assault.

When the trial finally wrapped up in June, most of the jurors believed Jaron – and firmly discounted the deception defense. But after nine days of deliberations, they couldn't decide whether the murder was premeditated – whether there actually was a *Sopranos*-like plan to kill Gwen – or whether it was just a sudden, drunken frenzy of violence. With the jury hopelessly deadlocked over whether to convict for first-degree murder, the judge declared a mistrial. Mike and Jose will remain locked up until the retrial, slated for May; Jay's family sprung him last August on a \$1 million bond.

Their victim did get one ruling in her favor, though. After Gwen died, her mother had asked a court to legally change her daughter's name. The day after the murder trial ended, the new name became official. "Edward Araujo Jr." was finally who she wanted to be: Gwen Amber Rose Araujo. Gwen even got something most daughters can only dream about: an apology from her mom. "It is one of my regrets," Sylvia says now, "that I didn't call my daughter Gwen more when she was alive."

Only in death did Gwen Araujo get what she wanted the most: acceptance and attention. *Everybody's* attention. "She loved the spotlight," says her uncle David Guerrero. "I guess she's got it now." 

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