

The Reinert Mystery: A Special Report

Sex, Drugs Trouble U. Merion High

By MARY JO MEISNER

Upper Merion High School in King of Prussia, Montgomery County, looks pretty much like any other suburban high school, with its sprawling parking lots, blond-brick buildings and manicured playing fields.

But parents, teachers, students and community residents say this campus has housed more festering problems, more bizarre incidents and more drug abuse than its peaceful exterior could ever suggest.

Residents of the affluent community trace these events directly to Jay C. Smith, the school's principal from 1966 to 1978, whose path from respected educator to convicted criminal and alleged sexual deviant has been chronicled in the press for more than a year.

Under Smith, these people say, Upper Merion High was a school out of control.

ALTHOUGH ONE school district official said Smith's laissez-faire approach to schooling prevented the types of confrontations that other schools were experiencing in the '60s and '70s, parents suggest it was only because the students had nothing to protest.

Since about 1972, when Smith instituted an "open school" policy, Upper Merion High students were allowed to do just about anything they pleased. The dress code was abolished. Students were allowed to leave campus at lunch and during free periods. If kids cut classes or failed to show up altogether, parents say they were not notified because Smith did not require teachers to report the absences.

"It was helter-skelter," one parent said.

During this time, they say, drugs were so prevalent on the campus that "they used to have daily emergencies with kids overdosing and having to go to the hospital." Instead of disciplining students caught with drugs,

parents say, some teachers actually encouraged its use.

"ONE TEACHER stated in class that he has to smoke pot or else he couldn't teach," one parent said.

Despite this, and despite the fact that students smoked marijuana and drank beer openly on the campus and on school buses, Upper Merion administrators failed to deal with the problem, parents and students say.

"The attitude was, 'Hey, you can do anything you want here, because this guy (Smith) doesn't care,'" a student said.

After voicing her concerns about drugs at Upper Merion during a school board meeting — and being told by school district officials that they knew nothing about the problem — one parent said she was approached by a teacher who told her:

"Everything you just said is true. Kids are selling pot and beer on campus. I've been taking down their names and license plate numbers and giving them to the administration, but nothing is ever done."

In fact, parents say, while Smith was principal he forbade Upper Merion police from coming on campus and was responsible for getting a school drug program squeezed.

NEXT MONTH, Smith — who has been convicted of two robbery charges and has pleaded no contest to a weapons offense — goes on trial on drug charges involving a large quantity of marijuana that was allegedly found by Upper Merion police in his King of Prussia home.

"Consistent weird and bizarre" stories about Smith have floated throughout the Upper Merion community for more than five years, parents and teachers said. The stories ranged from rumors about his alleged deviant sexual activities — some of which were detailed in recent news reports based on Smith's late wife's diaries — to reports of his "bizarre" behavior at the school.

"He would ramble on for what



A concerned mother makes a point during the Upper Merion school board meeting earlier this week

seemed like hours over the school loudspeaker, sometimes shooting the whole first period," a parent said. "He would have the kids bring questions in to him and he'd answer them. After awhile, the kids would start taking advantage of this, but he never knew."

When Smith was arrested last August after being seen wielding two revolvers in a Devon shopping center parking lot, parents say they were more relieved than shocked. With Smith under suspension and out of the school, parents say, a number of changes began to take place at Upper Merion High.

THEY CREDIT its new principal, Frank Luther, with tightening up the school's discipline system, attendance records and dress code. A uniformed security officer is now on campus during school hours. During a visit last year, one parent said she couldn't believe classes were actual-

ly in session. "It was like a morgue, it was so quiet."

The students apparently also appreciated the changes. Last year's senior class dedicated its yearbook to Luther, saying, "You took on a school that was certainly in need of direction, you turned it around and sent it on the right course."

The quiet was shortlived, however. Shortly after the school year ended last June, Upper Merion High English teacher Susan Reinert was found murdered near Harrisburg. Her two children are still missing. The probe into her death has centered on three other English teachers at the embattled school — Susan Myers, William S. Bradfield and Vincent Valatis — and earlier this week parents and students turned out in force at a school board meeting to demand that the three not be allowed to teach this year.

SINCE THE MURDER, further bizarre and disturbing stories about the school have flooded area newspapers, including reports of sexual liaisons between teachers and students and the forced resignation of a teacher who allegedly solicited female students to engage in sex and bondage "experiments."

Parents claim school district officials "covered up" many of these incidents, and they fear there is much more they don't know about.

But with school due to open next week, the overriding concern is the children — how they can possibly learn in a school overwhelmed with problems.

One parent — who recently agreed to allow her son to return to Upper Merion High after two years at a private school — now is reconsidering.

"Now we're looking into boarding schools in the Blue Ridge Mountains," she said, only half-jokingly.

Reinert In-Laws Wait for Word on Kids

John and Florence Reinert rarely leave their Phoenixville home these days. They stay close to the phone, close to the possibility that it will ring and someone will tell them that their grandchildren, Michael, 11, and Karen, 10, are alive.

Although Susan Reinert was divorced from their son, Ken, she remained close to the elder Reinerts. And on Friday, June 22, the couple was looking forward to the next week, when Susan was to bring Michael to their home for a week's visit after a quick trip to Allentown with his mother and sister.

Florence Reinert said Susan called that Friday, only hours before she disappeared. She was found murdered three days later.

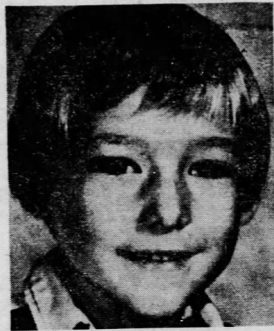
"SHE CALLED about 5 p.m.," said Mrs. Reinert. "She was concerned whether a tankful of gas was enough to get her to Allentown and back. I asked John, and he said it was enough if she didn't do too much driving while she was in Allentown. She said she wouldn't be."

Susan Reinert was due in Allentown Saturday morning to help run a workshop for Parents Without Partners, in which she was an active member.

After dropping off Michael, Susan was going to take Karen to a gym clinic, according to Mrs. Reinert, who added that Michael was going to



Karen Reinert: clothes folded on bed



Michael Reinert: was to be baptized

give up playing in a Tuesday baseball game so he could stay with his grandparents.

Mrs. Reinert said the plans were for Susan to

come back and pick up Michael for a while on Wednesday and take both children to the Valley Forge Music Fair. There were also plans for

Susan and Mrs. Reinert to discuss Michael's baptism at Washington Memorial Chapel, Valley Forge, with Pastor Sheldon Smith.

"SHE WAS A very good mother," said Mrs. Reinert, "always taking the children places and doing things for them." John Reinert, his eyes brimming, nodded.

Mrs. Reinert knew something was amiss that Monday (June 25) when Susan didn't arrive that morning with Michael. Then the early afternoon passed without word from them.

"We got a call from Ken (Susan's ex-husband) about four p.m. He talked to John and only said Sue had been in an automobile accident. Then he hung up," Mrs. Reinert recalled softly. "About a half-hour later he called back and explained what had happened."

State Police and FBI agents have been unable to find a shred of evidence to show that the children are either dead or alive.

Susan Reinert and the children were last seen at 9:15 p.m. Friday when the children were in front of their Ardmore home picking up hailstones left by a cloudburst. At 9:30 p.m., a neighbor heard two car doors slam, and Susan Reinert's car pulled out of her driveway.

State Police searched the home the following week. On the bed were two neat little piles of clothes, a change for both of the children. Empty suitcases sat nearby.