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INFAMOUS WEST VALLEY MURDER COMES TO BIG SCREEN

By FRED SHUSTER, Staff Writer

The victim's parents just want it over with, and most of the three dozen witnesses are trying to forget what they saw.

But among others, there's still fascination about the kidnapping and murder of 15-year-old Nicholas Markowitz West Hills -- a case that spawned national news coverage, an international hunt for the suspected mastermind and, now, a mainstream movie.

"It's still talked about," said Boyd Ingram, 29, of Woodland Hills, who knew some of the defendants in the high-profile murder case. "When something comes up in the news, and now with the movie coming out, it'll be talked about a lot more."

Set for release Friday, "Alpha Dog" is a pseudo-documentary inspired by the case of Jesse James Hollywood, a small-time thug accused of ordering Nick kidnapped and killed over a \$1,200 drug debt owed by the teen's older half-brother, Ben.

The film -- written and directed by Nick Cassavetes and starring Bruce Willis, Justin Timberlake and Sharon Stone -- has sparked conflict in the courtroom over its depiction of the events that shook an upscale West San Fernando Valley neighborhood.

"The movie is the prosecutor's theory of the case, based on their own files," said attorney James Blatt of Encino, who is representing Hollywood in the death-penalty case.

"This is an exact duplication of the times, the events and the dialogue of what transpired, based on the case files."

In October, Blatt persuaded a judge to oust Santa Barbara County prosecutor Ron Zonen from the case because he'd served as the primary consultant for "Alpha Dog."

"When a prosecutor in a pending case releases his entire file to a motion picture company and becomes a consultant, there is a conflict of interest," Blatt said. "That prosecutor has forfeited his right to try the case. It creates an appearance of impropriety and it cheapens the criminal justice system."

The California Supreme Court agreed last month to decide whether to reinstate Zonen, leave the case with the current prosecution team or turn it over to the state Attorney General's Office to pursue.

A decision is expected in about eight months, with Hollywood's trial delayed until then. Zonen

has denied any misconduct, and a spokesman for the Santa Barbara County District Attorney's Office declined to comment.

Cassavetes, 47, son of actress Gena Rowlands and the late actor-director John Cassavetes, became interested in the much-publicized story through his two daughters, who attended El Camino Real High School in Woodland Hills, where Markowitz had been a student and Hollywood had been enrolled years earlier.

``When I started looking into it, I expected to find a bunch of spoiled, disaffected rich kids raised by parents with a great sense of ennui, and that's not what I found at all," Cassavetes said. ``I ended up finding something I'm guilty of, too, which is: It's a complicated world where both parents have jobs and get caught up in their own lives. The result is you find yourself `checking in' with your kids to find out if they're OK instead of putting in the time to hang out with them."

The facts of the case

``Alpha Dog" parallels the tragedy that unfolded Aug. 6, 2000, when Jesse James Hollywood, then 20, and four of his followers went looking for Ben Markowitz to settle the drug debt he owed, court documents said. They happened instead upon Nick, who was walking to his home in the 23600 block of Arminta Street, and pulled him into their van, documents said.

According to testimony given during earlier trials, they drove to Santa Barbara and spent the next couple of days partying at various homes and a local motel -- frequently with adults present. Nick wasn't bound, witnesses said, and he partied with his captors, apparently believing he'd be released at some point.

However, on Aug. 8, Nick was marched into the Los Padres National Forest to a popular site known as Lizard's Mouth, witnesses testified. There, he was placed in a grave dug by his captors and shot nine times at point-blank range.

Within two weeks, Hollywood's four friends were in custody and Hollywood -- accused of ordering Nick killed -- was on the run.

While law enforcement searched for Hollywood -- he was featured on Fox TV's ``America's Most Wanted" -- his four co-defendants went on trial in Santa Barbara County. Ryan Hoyt, then 21, of West Hills, the triggerman, was convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to death.

Jesse Rugge, then 20, of Santa Barbara, was convicted of kidnapping and sentenced to life in prison with the possibility of parole. William Skidmore, then 20, of Simi Valley, pleaded guilty to kidnapping and robbery and was sentenced to nine years in prison. Graham Pressley, then 17, of Goleta, was convicted of second-degree murder and sentenced to a juvenile facility until his 25th birthday.

Hollywood himself was captured March 2005, living in a seaside community in Rio de Janeiro. He'd claimed to be a Canadian named Michael Costa Giroux, and lived with his pregnant

girlfriend on the \$1,200 his father sent each month and odd jobs he got teaching English and caring for people's dogs. He was deported to the United States to face murder charges.

`Hollywood' version

Cassavetes' \$13 million movie was ready for release when Hollywood was captured. The director then filmed a new ending that shows Johnny Truelove, the character based on the fugitive, being apprehended in Bolivia.

Blatt, Hollywood's lawyer, failed in an attempt to block release of the film on grounds that it would jeopardize his client's right to a fair trial. ``It's not just Universal's movie -- it's the district attorney's movie," Blatt said. ``It destroys the presumption of innocence."

Cassavetes said he had input from a variety of sources besides Zonen, including Nick's grief-stricken parents, Jeffrey and Susan Markowitz. In addition, Jack Hollywood, the murder suspect's father (played by Willis in the film), was often present during filming. A convicted drug dealer, Jack Hollywood recently completed a prison sentence in Arizona. Cast members said they were disturbed by Jack Hollywood's involvement and frequent appearances on the film set. ``It creeped me out, to be honest," said actor Anton Yelchin, 17, who plays Zack Mazursky, the character based on Nick.

Reactions, aftermath

People who were once friends with members of Jesse James Hollywood's inner circle remain shaken by the events and offer insight and perspective into the West Valley's party scene at that time.

``Jesse was doing big things around the Valley as far as drugs were concerned and everyone knew it," said Ingram. ``Ben was always trying to get what he could, but he'd exhausted his resources. They (Ben and Hollywood) started working together and I guess Ben (messed) with the wrong person. I thought (Jesse) was just another rich kid with an attitude -- and there were a lot of them around."

Cassavetes says nobody should blame the 818 area code for what happened to Nick. The problem, he said, was born out of ``letting all these children get together and make decisions without any kind of parental guidance or interference and they created the `perfect storm' of circumstances" that resulted in murder.

Nick's parents have spent the last six years pursuing justice for their youngest son. They attended the trials of the four co-defendants and won a settlement in a civil case challenging the Los Angeles Police Department's investigation of their son's kidnapping. They've appeared on NBC's ``Dateline" and given interviews to other media outlets, describing the love for their curly-haired son and their anguish at his death.

Now, they find themselves facing the release this week of ``Alpha Dog" and the start of

Hollywood's trial sometime this year. Plainly exhausted by the ordeal, Jeffrey Markowitz has just one hope: ``We wish the whole thing was over with already."

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Important events in Markowitz murder How the case unfolded, compiled from police reports, court records and trial testimony:

Aug. 6, 2000: Nicholas Markowitz, 15, is abducted and forced into a van near his West Hills home. Witnesses call the Los Angeles Police Department, which can't find the van. The van's occupants eventually are identified as Jesse James Hollywood of Canoga Park, William Skidmore of Simi Valley and Jesse Rugge of Santa Barbara.

Aug. 7, 2000: Graham Pressley of Goleta becomes involved as Nicholas is moved around to several Santa Barbara-area homes, including Rugge's. More people learn about Nicholas' plight, but no one helps.

Aug. 8, 2000: Nicholas' parents, Susan and Jeffrey Markowitz, file a missing persons report with the LAPD. Hollywood speaks with his attorney, learns he faces prison time and allegedly decides to kill Nicholas

Aug. 9, 2000: About 3 a.m., at Lizard's Mouth off West Camino Cielo near Santa Barbara, Nicholas is bound, gagged, shot nine times and buried in a shallow grave. At the time, Hollywood is celebrating his girlfriend's birthday with friends at a steakhouse in the Valley.

Aug. 12, 2000: Hikers discover Nicholas' bullet-riddled body and notify the Sheriff's Department. The murder weapon, a TEC-9 assault pistol, is found beneath one of the victim's feet.

Aug. 14, 2000: Detectives identify Nicholas through fingerprints from a previous arrest. An autopsy confirms he died from multiple gunshot wounds.

Aug. 15, 2000: A witness to the abduction reads a newspaper article about the murder, calls detectives and names the suspects.

Aug. 16, 2000: Rugge, Pressley, Skidmore and Hoyt are arrested on suspicion of murder and kidnapping. Hollywood is tracked to Palm Springs, Las Vegas and the Colorado Springs home of Richard Dispenza, his godfather.

Aug. 20, 2000: After three days at a Colorado hotel, Hollywood leaves with a high school friend, who drives him back to West Hills.

Aug. 23, 2000: Dispenza turns himself in after learning he's wanted on charges of harboring a fugitive.

September 2000: Hollywood is first featured on the Fox television show "America's Most Wanted." Sightings of the fugitive are reported as far away as Mexico and Canada, but the trail remains cold.

October 2000: A grand jury indicts the four arrested suspects and Hollywood on charges of murder, kidnapping and criminal conspiracy. The Santa Barbara district attorney seeks a death sentence against Hollywood, the alleged ringleader, and Hoyt, the alleged triggerman.

March 2001: Dispenza is convicted of being an accessory after the fact to murder and is sentenced to 480 hours of community service.

April 2001: Superior Court Judge Joseph Lodge rules Pressley must be tried as an adult, even though he was 17 when Nicholas was kidnapped and murdered.

July 2001: The FBI, Sheriff's Department and Nicholas' parents announce a \$30,000 reward for information leading to Hollywood's arrest; later increased to \$50,000.

October 2001: Jury trial begins for Hoyt; he is convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to death.

April 2002: Ruge's trial on felony kidnapping and murder charges begins; he is found innocent of murder but convicted of aggravated kidnapping. Sentenced to seven years to life in prison with the possibility of parole.

July 2002: Pressley's trial begins on charges of murder and kidnapping; he is acquitted of kidnapping but jury is unable to reach a verdict on the murder count. He is eventually convicted of second-degree murder and sentenced to five years in a California Youth Authority facility.

September 2002: Skidmore pleads guilty to kidnapping and robbery and is sentenced to nine years in prison.

July 2003: Pre-production begins on director-screenwriter Nick Cassavetes' "Alpha Dog," a pseudo-documentary on the case.

October 2004: Justin Timberlake and Sharon Stone agree to appear in the film.

March 2005: Hollywood is captured in Brazil, where authorities say he lived at a resort area north of Rio de Janeiro on \$1,200 a month sent by his parents and money from teaching English. He is extradited to Santa Barbara and pleads not guilty to murder, kidnapping and criminal conspiracy charges.

Late 2005 to late 2006: Hollywood's attorney, James Blatt of Encino, moves to force the Santa Barbara District Attorney's Office to withdraw from the case because Ron Zonen, the chief prosecutor, had shared case files with Cassavetes and acted as a consultant in developing the screenplay.

January 2006: ``Alpha Dog" gets mixed reviews at the Sundance Film Festival.

Jan. 12, 2007: ``Alpha Dog" opens in theaters nationwide.