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Cover Story: Death of a Conspiracy

Johnny Gosch, Jeff Gannon, Hunter Thompson and the unraveling of a troubling tale.

By Tim Schmitt

Noreen Gosch sits in a booth at the West Des Moines Village Inn, nursing a cup of coffee and managing, despite her larger-than-life personality, to blend into the surroundings and keep a low profile in the almost empty restaurant. She is open with her thoughts and willing to share what information she can, yet she remains guarded - cautious and thoughtful in a manner often mistaken as cold and standoffish. She thinks carefully as she speaks about her son, Johnny, and the players in a bizarre conspiracy surrounding his disappearance in 1982 that continues to evolve, and may finally be on the verge of breaking down.

"Just because you don't want to believe something is true," says Noreen slowly, "that doesn't mean it's not true."

It's a statement that bears repeating:

"Just because you don't want to believe something is true, that doesn't mean it's not true."

Anyone who has heard the theories surrounding Johnny Gosch's disappearance on Sept. 5, 1982 (and who in Iowa has not?), knows they are difficult to accept. If there are Satanic pedophiles working in the top levels of government and law enforcement selling kids on the black market and forcing them into prostitution, pornography, extortion and things far worse, it's easier as a human being to simply believe that such things could not be true.

But they could be.



And Noreen knows this all too well. She didn't want to believe her child was kidnapped, sexually abused, tortured, brainwashed and sold into slavery, but she accepts this now as an indisputable truth. And she is not alone.

Many others accept the existence of a vast network of high-profile people - powerful politicians, business leaders, law enforcement and government agents - who exist in a subculture of degenerates who participate in child pornography, snuff films, drugs, devil worship, brainwashing and kidnapping. And Noreen believes that Johnny (and hundreds of other children like him) was forced into this life of depravity by those who kidnapped him.

But Johnny's story has been told thousands of times. It's been analyzed, disputed and ridiculed just as frequently, and we have neither the time and space, nor the inclination to repeat it here in full. As, tragic as it may be, it's old news. Nothing major has happened in the case for some time, and the alleged players in the story have been silent, absent or simply missing for years.

Until recently.

In the past few months there's been a flurry of activity among the people once related to his case and the conspiracy that surrounds it. And in the midst of this commotion, some believe Johnny Gosch has been found very much alive.

Recent events began with Jeff Gannon, the right-wing journalist who was found to have gained access to the White House press pool with few credentials and a fake name. The death of Hunter S. Thompson followed shortly after. The arrest of two men, seemingly unrelated, in Nebraska and Virginia within days of the Gannon story and Thompson's death also play a role in the story.

And all these events, some suggest, are related to the 12-year-old paperboy kidnapped from West Des Moines 23 years ago.

And if they are right, there is much more to come...

Johnny lives

In late January a conservative journalist in Washington D.C. was found to have gained access to the White House press pool despite using a fake name, and despite the fact that he once worked as a high-priced homosexual escort.

Jeff Gannon was a White House correspondent for Talon News who regularly attended White House press briefings and at least four press conferences with President George W. Bush. On Jan. 26, 2005, Gannon asked a question of the president that was so friendly and factually inaccurate that some of his colleagues began looking into his background.

Talon News, it was learned, is a barely disguised tool of the Republican Party, and Gannon's credentials as a journalist consist solely of a training course at the Leadership Broadcast School of Journalism. After two days of training that cost \$50, Gannon was officially a graduate of a journalism

school and on his way to the White House press pool.

It was soon discovered that Gannon's real name is Jeff Guckert and that he has also gone by the nickname "Bulldog" when listing himself on the Internet as a homosexual escort and personal trainer charging \$200 per hour for his "discreet" services.

Gannon was removed from the White House and resigned from Talon News on Feb. 8 "Gannongate" quickly became the presidential scandal of the hour, though the story faded from public view as politicians and the media eagerly turned their attention to such pressing matters as steroids in baseball and the Terri Schiavo situation.

But before long, Internet bloggers had picked up the story and began to think back to the administration of President Bush's father, which was rocked by a scandal that allegedly involved a high-level official giving private, late-night tours of the White House to teenage, male prostitutes. The New York Times and the Washington Post both wrote about the story and the eventual death of Washington lobbyist Craig Spence, who reportedly arranged the visits. Spence, it has been suggested, was preparing to admit publicly that he was using the teenage boys to blackmail high-powered politicians in the beltway. He committed suicide before he had the opportunity to do so.

With a gay escort gaining access to the White House during a Bush administration while many of the same officials from the '80s are back in power, the question became, "Is there a connection?"

Private investigator Sherman H. Skolnick posted a story about the Gannon debacle on www.rense.com, a site know for its conspiracy theories, and publicly stated on Feb. 19 that Gannon is Johnny Gosch.

Andy Stephenson, a blogger from Seattle familiar with the details of the Johnny Gosch case and the child sex rings in Nebraska detailed in the Book, "The Franklin Cover-Up," began, with a group of other writers and investigators, to ponder the claim. They looked at markings on Gannon's body and compared them to those reported on Johnny Gosch. They considered the lack of personal information about Gannon's early years. They considered that Johnny was alleged to have been used as a gay prostitute for blackmail purposes. They considered that the high-powered people alleged to have kidnapped and brainwashed children as part of the government's Monarch Project and MK-Ultra program, including Johnny, did so to use them in a variety of ways to advance their own agendas. And they contacted Noreen Gosch and discussed the idea with her - the first she'd heard of the theory - and they, too, came to the conclusion that Jeff Gannon is none other than Johnny Gosch.

The Internet has been abuzz with the theory ever since. And, in a way, it makes perfect sense. You've got a kid abducted and brainwashed into doing the bidding of government officials as part of top-secret mind-control programs, so now that he's older why not put him into the White House to soften press briefings to make the president look better? The suggestion from many is that Gannon is a Monarch Program child-turned-adult operative.

Gannon, according to investigators like Skolnick, is involved in high-level espionage and is also an expert on torture. He is said to be an expert penetration agent, using sex to compile negative data on U.S. and foreign

governmental officials, and is also believed responsible for the Valerie Plame White House leak that allegedly caused 70 CIA undercover agents to be murdered.

Yet others suggest that Gosch took on the persona of James Gannon/Jeff Guckert and gained White House access with the eventual goal of exposing the people who kidnapped him and put him, and his family, through hell. Gannon is alleged to have a publishing deal with a Russian imprint, which some believe will result in a tell-all book that exposes those who've paid for his "services," as well as the pedophile ring that he, as Gosch, was victimized by after his kidnapping.

"I'm convinced 99 percent that he is Johnny Gosch" says Ted Gunderson, a retired FBI agent who has been working on the Gosch case for more than a decade. "The only way I'd be 100 percent sure is if there was a DNA test or if he admitted it."

He bases his opinion on a confidential source from whom he claims to have videotape testimony that has him identifying Gannon as Gosch.

"My source has told me in the past that he has maintained contact with Johnny Gosch," says Gunderson. "Let's just say he's in a position to know. The kids are all in touch with each other. It's a bond they all share."

The kids he refers to are those forced into the sex slavery rings and the government-sponsored mind-and behavior-control programs. One of those "kids" is a man named Paul Bonacci, who claims to have participated in the kidnapping of Johnny Gosch and says he was forced to be the first person to molest Johnny. Bonacci has long claimed to be part of the vast network of children trained to work for the government and participate in deviant sexual acts to make the blackmail of politicians possible.

In 1999, Bonacci won a \$1 million lawsuit against Larry King, the former head of the Franklin Credit Union in Nebraska, whom he claimed forced him into the pedophile ring. The federal judge ruled Bonacci was truthful in his testimony, which included his claim that he was one of several young male prostitutes known to have toured the White House in the 1980s.

Gunderson claims that Bonacci is not his source for the Gannon-is-Gosch claim, but adds that Bonacci informed him a while back that Gosch had changed his appearance. John DeCamp, author of "The Franklin Cover-Up" says Bonacci told him the same thing.

"I do know that Johnny Gosch altered his appearance and the changes I've heard about conform to how Gannon looks now," he says. "Paul told me you could be standing right next to him and not know it's Johnny."

And he says that Gannon has been asked the question, but refuses to answer one way or the other.

"A fellow in New York City went to his door and asked him about his mother in Iowa and he slammed the door on him," he says. "He wouldn't talk about it at all."

A mother's instinct

Noreen Gosch has seen the videotape that Gunderson made with his confidential informant and believes the man is credible.

"Ted sent me a videotape of his interview with his source and he said Gannon is Gosch, and he said it without hesitation and without blinking an eye," recalls Noreen. "And he said he's known it for months."

When the theory was first proposed, Noreen's phone was ringing every 15 minutes with calls from bloggers, investigators, and radio and TV stations, all asking if she would identify Gannon as her son. She has not done so. She's sat with the numerous photos from the Internet and compared them to those of Johnny, herself and John Gosch Sr. looking for similar features.

"I could see some of the similarities that the bloggers were talking about," she says. "I could see in (Gannon) the features that Johnny had. And the last time I saw Paul Bonacci, he told me that Johnny had changed his entire appearance again. That he shaved his head and is going with that look for now."

She says the birthmark on Johnny's chest is very similar to a mark seen on Gannon's chest in at least one photo. And she points out that Gannon has a spot on his right cheek in the same place as Johnny. Sometimes, she's almost convinced. But it's not quite enough and she just can't - or won't - say for sure that Gannon is her son.

"People have asked me why I can't recognize him if I saw I him in 1997, and I tell them a picture from the Internet is a lot different than someone sitting in your kitchen," she says.

Noreen claims that Johnny visited her at her West Des Moines apartment in 1997, but told her he could not come out of hiding because his life and hers would be put in grave danger.

But what about her gut feeling? Her maternal instinct?

"Honestly, it changes," she says. "Sometimes I think, 'oh, yeah, that looks like him,' and other times the jump is too much to think about. When you factor in the facts, it's hard to believe. I've spent a lot of sleepless nights over this. I really wish I could say for sure."

But Noreen is no fool. She knows the risk of saying, one way or the other, if she thinks this is her son. If it is, and he's chosen not to say anything, she understands that he has reasons for his secrecy that are likely life-threatening and her outing him could very well put him at risk. If she were to claim Gannon is Johnny and is proven wrong later, then any amount of credibility she has left would go out the window.

"Even if he (Gannon) admitted to it, I would still want a DNA test done," she says. "This is so surreal. It's like I'm on the outside looking in. Almost 23 years have passed and we know he's still alive, but to potentially have your loved one found is just unreal. If this would turn out to be Johnny it would be a blessing for everyone to know what happened and to have it all wrapped up."

Subliminal hints

That is unlikely to happen anytime soon. Despite millions of words devoted to the subject on the Web and investigations being conducted by hundreds of Internet detectives, Gannon has not acknowledged the speculation.

Despite this, some say that Gannon has been providing clues to his real identity on his Web page (www.jeffgannon.com), which is still active.

Shortly after the theory was presented, Gannon posted an article titled "Hiding in Plain Sight," and has posted a column entitled "Fear and Loathing in the Press Room," which some suggest is a reference to the recently deceased Hunter S. Thompson, who also was accused of involvement in pedophile, child slavery rings in the 1980s (see below).

Others suggest that his name itself is a clue to his real identity. Both Jeff Gannon and James Guckert share the same initials as Johnny Gosch. Furthermore, shortly after Johnny's disappearance, Noreen made a personal plea to the editor of The Des Moines Register, Johnny's employer. The editor printed her letter in the paper and mocked it by allowing the police department to dissect it. The editor's name was James Gannon.

"I would say that those are subliminal messages," says Gunderson, an attempt on Gannon's part to let slip his identity.

Jim Rothstein, a retired New York Police Detective who spent more than 35 years in the force, much of it investigating child slavery, pedophile rings, agrees that the evidence is strong that Gannon is actually Johnny Gosch.

"To me Gannon looks like Johnny," says Rothstein. "Everything just fits - the profile, the M.O., everything."

Rothstein has been involved as a private investigator on the Gosch case for the past several years, and says he is working to get the final proof needed to determine Gannon's true identity.

"We're working on getting a tail on him and getting a DNA sample to test," he says. "I still can't figure out why no-one knows where he (Gannon) was for 10 years."

There have been some Internet postings that give a timeline of Gannon's life, but according to Rothstein they are based on flimsy information that is not to be trusted.

"Records are easy to create," he says. "Maybe this Guckert kid died and someone took over his identity. If it is not Johnny Gosch, then it's one of the other kids like Johnny Gosch."

Says Noreen: "If all this is true, I don't think he was ready to be exposed just yet."

Hunter and snuff films

The Gannon/Gosch connection was first made public early in the morning on Feb. 20. Later that same day, Hunter S. Thompson was found dead in his home, the victim of an apparent self-inflicted gunshot.

Few people would ever have thought to connect Thompson and Gosch, but

those familiar with the tales of child abuse and pedophilia documented in "The Franklin Cover-Up," a book first released in 1994 by former Neb. State Sen. John DeCamp, understand the association.

In his book, DeCamp relates many interviews and discussions with Paul Bonacci, the young man who claims to have been involved with the kidnapping of Johnny Gosch. Bonacci told horrific tales of being forced into sex with adults and other children. In one case he recalls being flown into Nevada with another young boy whom he did not know. They took on another passenger there and headed to a secluded location where Bonacci says he was forced to have sex with the younger boy. The young boy, Bonacci claims in this book, was also forced to have sex with adult males, who then killed the boy with a gunshot to the head. Bonacci says he was then forced to have sex with the corpse.

The passenger they took on in Nevada filmed the entire thing, and Bonacci recalled that his name was Hunter Thompson.

"I think it's kind of strange that Hunter Thompson would commit suicide at this time," says Gunderson. "Several kids told us that he directed snuff films. I think it's a strong possibility that he was murdered and I strongly suspect that it's all connected."

And the speculation on the Internet has been that Thompson was either killed to prevent his coming forward, or that he killed himself because he feared his role as a director of child snuff films would be proven true.

DeCamp also expressed some surprise at the timing of Thompson's death and says he still believes Bonacci's claim is true. Stephenson, the blogger from Seattle who has investigated the Gosch case, is also suspicious.

"I wonder, did he know? In light of Paul's (Bonnaci) testimony regarding the snuff film, I submit he knew quite a bit," he says. "The timing of his death was interesting."

The snuff film that Thompson allegedly made with Paul Bonacci is believed, based on Bonacci's description of the surroundings, to have been filmed at Bohemian Grove, a summer camp of sorts for the rich and powerful. Bohemian Grove is a secluded area outside Sacramento, Calif., where world leaders and dignitaries meet annually for a retreat that involves neo-pagan activities, including mock human sacrifices made before a large Owl statue referred to as "Moloch." While conducting this ritual, which they call "The Cremation of Care," participants are dressed in druid robes and chant and sing before Moloch.

Information on these gatherings has been well known for some time, though video footage has only recently been leaked out of the site. The site is very secure and access is available only to a handful of people worldwide. As a child, Bonacci could never have had access to the site, but he described it accurately, including the large owl statue.

Noreen Gosch says that on one recent evening her Web site, www.johnnygosch.com, had more than 50 hits that came from within a 10-mile radius of Bohemian Grove.

The CIA pedophile

In her book, "Why Johnny Can't Come Home," Noreen Gosch writes about a man who contacted her just six months after Johnny's disappearance claiming he worked with a government agency that was investigating pedophile organizations.

George Paul Bishop (often known just as Paul Bishop) claimed he was a "CIA asset" and arrived in Des Moines in July of 1984 to offer his assistance to the Goschs. Before he left, he provided, through his investigation, a detailed map of the kidnapping scene. Bishop, according to Noreen's book, often called the Gosch home from the Washington D.C. office of Sen. Charles Grassley, with whom Noreen had worked on Johnny's case.

"Many times Paul Bishop would call me from Sen. Grassley's office and, when finished speaking with me, he would hand the phone to one of Grassley's aides who I was familiar with," Noreen recalled in her book, published in 2000. "That convinced me Paul was an accepted visitor on the Hill in Washington."

Based on this, Noreen believed that Bishop was responsible for securing her invitation to testify before Sen. Arlan Specter's Hearing on Organized Crime and its Relationship to Kidnapping at the U.S. Capitol. Bishop, in fact, picked Noreen up from her D.C. hotel and accompanied her to the hearings.

Bishop became close to Noreen, even referring to her as "Mom," but suddenly, in 1985, he disappeared from the scene. The phone number he'd left was no longer valid and no one knew how to contact him. No one had seen or heard from him in almost 20 years, until he was suddenly arrested on Feb. 4 of this year in Virginia, after police allegedly found an explicit video of a 16-year-old boy in his home.

Detectives searched Bishop's home and found the tape after receiving a complaint that he was allowing teenage boys to drink and use drugs on the premises.

Noreen wonders now if Bishop was on the wrong side of Johnny's case all along. Was he involved in the kidnapping and merely running a smokescreen at the time to prevent discovery? Was his recent arrest an effort to keep him quiet about the larger story? A threat?

Or was he honest from the beginning and his recent arrest merely an effort to discredit him before he reappeared and started making noise and threatening to expose the powerful people involved?

Either way, Bishop seemed to know a lot about Johnny's disappearance in 1982, and his sudden reappearance on the scene coinciding with the outing of Jeff Gannon, the death of Thompson and the arrest of another man involved with the case (below) is too much of a coincidence for some to accept.

"It's very common to set someone up and arrest him to discredit him," says Rothstein.

The photographer

Rusty Nelson claimed that he once turned down an offer of \$50,000 from

Hunter S. Thompson to help in the production of a snuff film. The offer was allegedly made because Nelson worked closely with Larry King, the central figure in the "Franklin Cover-Up" accused of running a pedophile and child slavery ring. Nelson would often accompany King to elaborate parties where he worked as a photographer, taking photos of high-profile individuals in compromising positions with young boys and girls.

Nelson testified in court that he participated as a photographer, but claims that, though he took compromising photos, he never took any hardcore pornographic pictures; that he absolutely refused any involvement with child pornography. But he claims that King employed a Nelson look-alike for this purpose in order to compromise both the powerful people in the photos and Nelson himself. Nelson has admitted taking tens of thousands of photos, many of which have been confiscated and either destroyed or permanently sealed to protect those depicted. But many, according to some reports, remain hidden.

Despite his denials, Nelson has served time for his photography work, having been arrested in Oregon years ago with a van full of photos, at least one of which was said to involve a minor engaged in less-than-legal activity. He's been living in Nebraska for some time, providing what information he can to private investigators and trying to put his life back together. Most recently he was working with a friend to open a studio that specializes in wedding photography.

But two days after Thompson's death, Nelson was rounded up by police and arrested, reportedly for failing to register as a sex offender in a county of which he was no longer a resident.

John DeCamp bailed Nelson out of jail and says he thinks the arrest was intended as a warning to him and others that they best keep their mouths shut. Others agree.

"The timing is interesting," says Stephenson. "Especially given Thompson's death and Paul Bishop's recent arrest. I would place a suicide watch on both men.

"I think there's fixin' to be a heap of manure hitting the air circulating device soon," he adds. "I wonder about the timing. I have been wondering why all these people have all of a sudden come out of the woodwork. I wonder if there is a 'purge' going on. I don't think injustice ever leaves the public consciousness. I think there is far more going on here than we know."

So why now? After all this time, why the activity and renewed interest in the Johnny Gosch case and the tales of child abduction, slavery and prostitution in general. Did the theory that Gannon is actually Johnny Gosch hit too close to home and threaten to expose those with secrets to keep?

One suggestion is that increased media attention has the players in the decades-old scandal getting jumpy and looking to protect themselves.

Nick Bryant, the man who confronted Gannon at his home and asked him about Johnny Gosch, has apparently been working on this story for several years and has been shopping the finished product around for a publisher.

Rothstein says he's been working with Bryant for at least three years, and that Bryant was originally commissioned to do the story for Rolling Stone, which has since turned the finished piece down. The New York Times and several other outlets have reportedly shown interest in the story recently, as well.

Bryant declined to comment either on the Gannon situation or his involvement in writing a story. But, Rothstein says since Bryant began showing the piece around, the players involved have once again become active.

"Something is cooking here now," he says. "They'll have to throw someone to the wolves, but there's no telling how high it will go."

Everyone involved in the story acknowledges that it sounds like a wacky conspiracy theory, but the evidence of the conspiracy is too vast, they say, to simply dismiss it.

"I'm a conspiracy realist, because there is a conspiracy out there," says Gunderson, who says just two weeks ago he was chased through his neighborhood by an unknown man with a gun.

Adds Rothstein: "If two people were involved in kidnapping that kid, then it's a conspiracy. Well, these people don't work alone so it's a conspiracy. They try to discredit you by calling you a conspiracy theorist. Damn right I'm a conspiracy theorist, because that's what it is."

Still, in the end, this is a story about a young boy stolen from his home and his family. This simple tragedy is often lost in the complicated theories and conjecture, but it remains the single, undeniable truth in the entire story.

"I hold out hope that we'll be able to have regular communications with him," Noreen says of her son. "We know he's alive, and up until a couple years ago, we knew what he was doing and where. Maybe he could keep in touch with his mom, but moving back to Des Moines to live a life here? Those windows of opportunity have closed. I hear the horrible things people say about me. I can only imagine what they would say about him given the things he's been through.

"Johnny knows I tried, and who's to say it's all over. We don't know yet. If this is it, we're in the final days and this is all going to blow wide open." PB

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