



He was a  
friendless high  
school loner  
struggling  
with autism.  
So why did  
an undercover  
cop target  
him as a  
drug dealer?

**By Sabrina  
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PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID WALTER BANKS

# THE ENTRAPMENT OF

**THE BUST** Snodgrass  
made the nightly news  
when he was arrested in  
Operation Glasshouse.

# JESSE SNODGRASS

JESSE SNODGRASS PLODDED AROUND YET AN- other stucco corner, searching for Room 254 in time for the second-period bell, only to find he was lost yet again. Jesse felt a familiar surge of panic. He was new to Chaparral High School and still hadn't figured out how to navigate the sprawling Southern California campus with its outdoor maze of identical courtyards studded with baby palm trees. Gripping his backpack straps, the 17-year-old took some deep breaths. Gliding all around him were his new peers, chatting as they walked in slouchy pairs

and in packs. Many of their mouths were turned up, baring teeth, which Jesse recognized as smiles, a signal that they were happy. Once he regained his composure, he followed the spray-painted Chaparral Puma paw prints on the ground, his gait stiff and soldierly, and prayed that his classroom would materialize. He was already prepared to declare his third day of school a disaster.

At last, Jesse found his art class, where students were milling about in the final moments before the bell. He had resigned himself to maintaining a dignified silence when a slightly stocky kid with light-brown hair ambled over and said, "Hi."

"Hi," Jesse answered cautiously. Nearly six feet tall, Jesse glanced down to scan the kid's heart-shaped face, and seeing the corners of his mouth were turned up, Jesse relaxed a bit. The kid introduced himself as Daniel Briggs. Daniel told Jesse that he, too, was new to Chaparral – he'd just moved from Redlands, an hour away, to the suburb of Temecula – and, like Jesse, who'd recently relocated from the other side of town, was starting his senior year.

Jesse squinted and took a long moment to mull over Daniel's words. Meanwhile, Daniel sized up Jesse, taking in his muscular build and clenched jaw that topped off Jesse's skater-tough look: Metal Mulisha T-shirt, calf-length Dickies, buzz-cut hair and a stiff-brimmed baseball hat. A classic suburban thug. Lowering his voice, Daniel asked if Jesse knew where he might be able to get some weed.

"Yeah, man, I can get you some," Jesse answered in his slow monotone, every word stretched out and articulated with odd precision. Daniel asked for his phone number, and Jesse obliged, his insides roiling with both triumph and anxiety. On one hand, Jesse could hardly believe his good fortune: His conversation with Daniel would stand as the only meaningful in-

teraction he'd have with another kid all day. On the other hand, Jesse had no idea where to get marijuana. All Jesse knew in August 2012 was that he had somehow made a friend.

THOUGH IT SMACKS OF SUB-urban myth or TV make-believe, undercover drug stings occur in high schools with surprising frequency, with self-consciously dopey names like "Operation D-Minus" and, naturally, "Operation Jump Street." They're elaborate stings in which adult undercover officers go to great lengths to pass as authentic teens: turning in homework, enduring detention, attending house parties and using current slang, having Googled the terms beforehand to ensure their correctness. In Tennessee last year, a 22-year-old policewoman emerging from 10 months undercover credited her mom's job as an acting coach as key to her performance as a drug-seeking student, which was convincing enough to have 14 people arrested. Other operations go even further to establish veracity, like a San Diego-area sting last year that practically elevated policing to performance art, in which three undercover deputies had "parents" who attended back-to-school nights; announcing the first of the sting's 19 arrests, Sheriff Bill Gore boasted this method of snaring teens was "almost too easy."

The practice was first pioneered in 1974 by the LAPD, which soon staged annual undercover busts that most years arrested scores of high schoolers; by the Eighties, it had spread as a favored strategy in the War on Drugs. Communities loved it: Each bust generated headlines and reassured citizens that police were proactively combating drugs. Cops loved the stings, too, which not only served as a major morale boost but could also be lucrative. "Any increase in narcotics arrests is good for police departments. It's all about numbers," says former LAPD Deputy Chief

Stephen Downing, who now works with the advocacy group Law Enforcement Against Prohibition and views these operations with scorn. "This is not about public safety – the public is no safer, and the school grounds are no safer. The more arrests you have, the more funding you can get through federal grants and overtime."

Yet despite the busts' popularity, their inner workings were shrouded in secrecy, with few details publicly released about their tactics and overall effectiveness. And as time went on, officers and school administrators became alarmed by the results they saw: large numbers of kids arrested for small quantities of drugs – and who, due to "zero tolerance" policies, were usually expelled from school. No studies appear to exist on the efficacy of high school drug stings, but the data on undercover operations in general isn't encouraging. A 2007 Department of Justice-funded meta-analysis slammed the practice of police sting operations, finding that they reduce crime for a limited time – three months to a year – if at all. "At best, they are a stopgap measure," and at worst, an expensive waste of police resources, which "may prevent the use of other, more effective problem-solving techniques." The federal study concludes that sting operations reap little more than one consistent benefit: "favorable publicity" for police.

To be sure, public-relations speed bumps have appeared now and again, like when a female LAPD narc allegedly romanced a high school football player, which surfaced via her steamy love letters, or when a developmentally disabled child was swept up in another L.A. bust after selling \$9 worth of marijuana to an undercover. But until now, no department seems to have gone so far as to lay a trap for an autistic kid.

FROM HIS SEAT AT A WORKTABLE in the art room, Deputy Daniel Zipperstein observed his target and tablemate, Jesse Snodgrass. Like all the other students, Deputy Zipperstein was busily working on the day's class assignment, building a sculpture using cardboard, paper and wire, but Jesse was clearly flummoxed by the project's complexity. Their ponytailed teacher, James Taylor, paused by the boys' table. "Jesse, OK," Taylor instructed, holding up a piece of cardboard. "Today's task will be to cut out six cardboard squares of this size." Taylor took pains to pare down each assignment into bite-size chunks for Jesse, but even so, he'd need to keep circling back to remind Jesse to stay on his single small task. Zipperstein watched Jesse slowly pick up the scissors and get to work.

No one at Chaparral High School knew that transfer student "Daniel Briggs" was in fact a cop in his mid-twenties; as is typical in such an investigation, only a few

Contributing editor SABRINA RUBIN ERDELY wrote "About a Girl" in *RS* 1195.

top district administrators were aware of the operation. With Daniel's Billabong T-shirts, camo shorts and Vans, "he looked just like an average kid," remembers student Jessica Flores, then 17. Handsome and quick to smile, Daniel was meeting new friends with remarkable ease, though some students remained wary, due to his habit of interrupting strangers' conversations whenever the subject of drugs came up – for which he quickly acquired the nickname "Deputy Dan." Madalyn Dunn,

started buzzing Jesse's otherwise-silent phone with texts. Jesse had only ever had one friend before, another special-ed kid who'd recently moved to Alabama, leaving Jesse bereft. And now that Jesse had switched to a new school – a move foisted upon the Snodgrasses when their old house had gone into foreclosure – he had been especially agitated lately. It was only the latest distress in a lifetime of everyday struggles, which Catherine and Doug did their best to help Jesse navigate, fighting

population 100,000 – past the big-box strip malls and into their neighborhood of Mediterranean-style homes, where a man-made duck pond sparkled and joggers bounced past. Jesse's phone vibrated. "He can't do it today, he's grounded," Jesse recited. Made sense to him. Daniel had already told Jesse that he was always in trouble with his strict mom, a conflict that left him superstressed – which was why Daniel "really needed" Jesse to hook him up with some pot.



**TARGETED** "The people who did this should be ashamed," says Jesse's dad, Doug (with Jesse and mom Catherine).

"Maybe another time. You guys could order pizza, play video games, just hang out," Catherine said. Forging friendships was normally so hard for Jesse, who had the cognitive skills of an 11-year-old and was nearly oblivious to the facial expressions, body language, vocal tones and other contextual cues that make up basic social interactions. He was slow to draw inferences or interpret the casual idioms other kids used, like "catch you later," a phrase Jesse had initially found startling, since it turned out to involve no catching whatsoever. As a toddler, he'd once been terrified for days after his preschool teacher told him, "I'll keep my eye on you."

Jesse had seemed typical enough until age two. Then words started disappearing from his vocabulary, and he spoke in a sporadic, garbled language. His parents grew worried: Their young son made no eye contact and scarcely registered the presence of other people, but drew hundreds of pictures of their vacuum cleaner and would spend hours waving a crayon in front of his face, entranced by the fan of color it etched in the air. When Jesse was five, a neurologist diagnosed him with Asperger's syndrome, a variant of autism; over

## "YEAH, MAN, I CAN GET YOU WEED," JESSE TOLD DANIEL. BUT HE HAD NO IDEA WHERE TO GET POT. ALL HE KNEW WAS HE'D SOMEHOW MADE A FRIEND.

then 17, was startled while she chatted with friends during shop class, and the new kid leapt right in: "Are you talking about ketamine?" Dan said, then asked if she'd sell him some, which she declined. Nonetheless, the two wound up walking to fourth period together, bonding over their fondness for pot. After that, Madalyn says, Daniel wouldn't stop asking her for drugs. "Oh, come on," he'd pester.

Deputy Dan was just as aggressive with Jesse Snodgrass, pursuing the friendless boy outside the confines of school. Jesse's mom, Catherine, and his dad, Doug, an engineer, had been delighted when Jesse had come home talking about his new friend from art class; they'd been even more surprised when Daniel had

the constant battles waged by the parents of children on the autism spectrum: sticking up for him when he was ostracized from playgrounds or asked to leave restaurants as a child; standing up to school districts to secure Jesse equal access to education. Though the Snodgrasses also had two younger children at home, Jesse's needs had long made him a focal point. They were ready for his life to get easier and were thrilled with the calming prospect of this new friendship.

"Why don't you tell Daniel to come over?" Catherine urged.

"OK." Jesse hunched over his phone as his mom drove him home through the clean streets of Temecula – a planned suburban community northeast of San Diego,

the years, Jesse's diagnoses would expand to include Tourette's, bipolar disorder and depression. An evaluator prepared the Snodgrasses for the possibility that Jesse might never speak again. Catherine quit her advertising job to plunge Jesse into intensive autism therapies. Amazingly, the interventions got him back on track enough that he was able to attend regular school, taking special-ed classes and mainstream electives, with a counseling team to help him manage.

But Jesse's difficulties were hardly over. He was bullied throughout middle school, mocked as a "retard." He lashed out at his tormentors and, in doing so, developed a discipline record, with suspensions for fighting and many a day penal-

ized in “lunch club,” scraping gum from under desks. Jesse rarely complained about his mistreatment; he was a boy who didn’t think to ask for help. Instead, he vented his frustrations with episodes of headbanging, scratching and punching himself, violent and bloody bursts of self-injury. It took Jesse years of therapy to wean himself from those self-injurious impulses and soothe himself instead with benign motor tics like wringing his hands or snapping his fingers when he felt anxious.

He also found another way to cope. During his sophomore year of high school, Jesse shaved his head, began lifting weights and developed a new persona his therapist Jason Agnetti came to call his “bro identity.” Dressed in wife-beaters that showed off his biceps, saggy jeans and baseball caps, Jesse would stomp around school, dropping f-bombs and calling other kids “retards.” He talked about extreme sports like motocross, off-roading and skateboarding, even though in reality he couldn’t ride a bike or even tie his own shoelaces. In his junior year, Jesse drew a bong on his notebook and called himself “Jesse Smokegrass,” despite his inexperience with pot. By emulating the bad-boy swagger of his own bullies, Jesse was putting on a suit of armor. Though his parents were a little concerned – and irritated with all his unnecessary posing – they saw it as a phase and, in that regard, not unlike other powerful antagonistic personae Jesse had identified with in the past. “There was a period of time when he was really obsessed with the Undertaker, the wrestler,” says Doug. “And in fourth grade, he was obsessed with Bowers in *Super Mario*.”

To some extent, the bro disguise worked, making Jesse less approachable and even, from a distance, menacing. Anyone who took a closer look, however, could see past the facade. As he strode the halls of Chaparral, with his robot walk and compulsive finger-snapping, it was clear that something was amiss. “You could see right away that there’s something off about him,” says Perry Pickett, who at the time was a Chaparral junior. And as soon as Jesse spoke –with his flat affect, slow response time and inability to follow any but the simplest instructions – his impairment was obvious.

And yet Deputy Dan was unrelenting. As the weeks went by and Jesse continued to stall, Daniel sent Jesse 60 text messages, hounding him to deliver on his promise to get marijuana. “He was pretty much stalking me,” remembers Jesse. “With the begging for the drugs and ev-

everything, it was kind of a drag.” Already anxious about his new home and new school, Jesse was conflicted. He knew he didn’t really want to get marijuana for Daniel – not that he even knew how – and that the drug requests were ratcheting up his anxiety to an intolerable level. But Jesse also desperately wanted Daniel to like him and didn’t want to fail his new friend. Daniel’s oft-stated plight that his home life made him so unhappy that he needed to self-medicate struck a certain chord with Jesse, who also needed pharmaceuticals in order to function. “I take medication for my own issues,” Jesse confessed to Daniel, rattling them off: Depakote, Lamictal, Clonazepam. Burdened by his sense of obligation, frightened and

small adjacent to Chaparral’s ball fields. Daniel’s car was already parked in the empty lot when Doug and Jesse arrived at 7:10 a.m. Jesse leapt out of the station wagon. “Stay here,” Jesse instructed his father. Doug, proud of his son’s social accomplishment, contented himself with a friendly wave at the young fellow before driving off. Daniel waved back.

The previous weekend, saddled with Daniel’s \$20 bill, Jesse had agonized over how to get his hands on some pot. At last, the answer hit him. The medical-marijuana dispensary in downtown Temecula sold marijuana! Jesse congratulated himself on his logic. He and his family often spent leisurely afternoons browsing downtown’s pedestrian thoroughfare,



**STUNG** At the police station, Jesse (left) was shocked to learn his only friend, Daniel (above left), was a cop.

helpless, the pressure was too much for Jesse to handle. One day the turmoil had been so great that after art class, Jesse fled to the boys’ bathroom and burned his arm with a lighter.

Three weeks into the school year, Doug and Catherine Snodgrass held a meeting with Jesse’s educational-support team, in light of Jesse’s self-inflicted burn, to discuss their son’s transition to Chaparral. “They were concerned about him building friendships at the school,” attendee Delfina Gomez, Jesse’s behavioral-health specialist, would later testify. Unaware that Jesse was being befriended by a narc, the team assured the Snodgrasses that overseeing Jesse was a priority for them, including finding him “a classroom buddy, peer buddy or peer leader.”

Elsewhere in the building that same day, Daniel pressed \$20 into Jesse’s hand.

“I’ll see what I can get you,” Jesse told him.

“I’M GONNA MEET DANIEL before class,” Jesse told his father five days later while on the drive to school. He bent to read the screen of his phone. “Take me to the Outback Steakhouse.” Jesse was jumpy. He’d asked Daniel to come over to his house for the marijuana handoff, but Daniel was insisting on meeting at a strip

where Jesse would branch off for an hour of solo exploration before reconnecting at the Root Beer Company for sodas. Sure enough, that weekend Jesse wandered toward the dispensary and approached a pale man with bad skin and longish hair – “he kind of had that look of a junkie,” Jesse says – who took his \$20 and, to Jesse’s infinite relief, handed him a clear sandwich baggie with weed inside.

Now, standing with Daniel beside his car and in a hurry to get this nerve-racking errand over with, Jesse thrust the precious stash into his hands. Daniel glanced at it. It was a pathetic half-gram of dried-up flakes – about five dollars’ worth of marijuana, maybe enough to roll a single skinny joint. Still, Daniel seemed satisfied. He threw it in his glove compartment and suggested they get to class. Later that day, Deputy Zipperstein handed off the baggie to another deputy, who transported it to a police station, where the drugs were field-tested by yet another officer, then ceremoniously weighed, photographed and tagged as evidence: SUS – SNODGRASS, JESSE \$20/.6 GRAM MARIJUANA BUY #1. The picture was transferred onto CD for posterity.

The Riverside County Sheriff’s Department was becoming expert at this sort of thing. Over the previous two years, it had staged two stings in other school districts, arresting 14 students at Palm Des-

ert High School in 2010, and 24 students from Moreno Valley and Wildomar high schools in 2011; in both cases, undercover cops had bought marijuana, Ecstasy and cocaine. So when in July 2012 the sheriff's department had approached the Temecula Valley Unified School District to report a suspicion of drug sales in two high schools, Superintendent Timothy Ritter had granted permission for Operation Glasshouse. (All TVUSD personnel declined comment, citing litigation.) His compliance seemed natural in conservative Temecula, a former tiny ranching town whose population had exploded over the past 20 years as people seeking affordable homes moved inland – many of them military families from Camp Pendleton – and where police maintained an aggressive presence, intent on keeping it an oasis of order.

Two young, attractive deputies were chosen for Operation Glasshouse. Deputy Yesenia Hernandez was enrolled in Temecula Valley High School. Petite and outgoing, she was an instant hit, especially with the boys, who misread her attentions. Deputy Daniel Zipperstein was dispatched to Chaparral, where, as the new kid constantly talking about drugs, he had to overcome some initial skepticism. "Ask him for his badge number!" some kids playfully called out, when at lunch-

view into the dance room, Daniel exhorted about a 15-year-old in spandex, "Dang, look at the ass on that one!"

Before long, kids accepted Daniel as one of their own, enough that his unusual persistence in ferreting out drugs stopped raising red flags, as well as his notably indiscriminate appetite. "If you mentioned weed, he wanted weed," says Madalyn, who sold him some of her marijuana, LSD and molly. "If I brought up acid, that's what he wanted. He said he wanted to get coke. He had no limitation." Students also overlooked how odd it was for a high schooler to have so much cash, giving it out with such abandon. Once, when he handed Perry \$15, asking for weed, and Perry came back empty-handed, Daniel told him to keep the money.

"I felt like I owed him something," says Perry, who, due to his learning difficulties, was a special-needs student with an individualized learning plan. He had felt especially bad because Daniel had been so open and vulnerable about his lousy family situation. So when Perry heard that a kid in his third-period class was selling Vicodin swiped from his parents' medicine cabinet, he offered to introduce Daniel. Strangely enough, he says, Daniel demurred, but instead handed Perry \$14, instructed him to buy \$10 worth of pills on his behalf – thus creating the trans-

drug target. The boys didn't pick up on the bait; they were agog, having learned a new drug-taking technique.

As autumn drew to a close, Daniel had little contact with Jesse Snodgrass anymore. He'd managed to give Jesse another \$20, two weeks after the first sale – and, in return, got an even skimpier amount of marijuana than the first time, under a half-gram. But then Daniel had asked Jesse to sell him some Clonazepam, Jesse's anxiety medication. Jesse was adamant in his refusal: That was *his* medicine – he needed it. When Jesse wouldn't budge, Daniel completely lost interest in their friendship. The rejection stung. Jesse's parents would inquire about Daniel, and he'd shrug it off. He tried to forget about it and focus on the things that mattered, like passing algebra. Against all odds, Jesse was inching his way toward a high school diploma.

On the morning of December 11th, the door to Jesse's art classroom burst open, and five armed police officers in bullet-proof vests rushed in, calling his name. Jesse was handcuffed in front of his classmates. He thought maybe he was asleep and dreaming. "I was confused," he remembers. "I didn't know what was going on," and he didn't connect the events back to Daniel. Neither did Madalyn or Jessica, who also were arrested in their classrooms; the three of them, along with two other boys, were paraded in handcuffs out of Chaparral and into a police van. At the same time, in a classroom at nearby Rancho Vista continuation high school, Perry – who'd transferred to get better one-on-one special-needs attention – was being shackled; and Sebastian, sick at home, awoke to find his bedroom filled with cops. Fifteen students from Temecula Valley High School were also rounded up, bringing the number of students arrested in Operation Glasshouse to an impressive 22.

The scale of the takedown operation was enormous, from the swarming of officers in tactical gear to the police helicopter hovering overhead. Authorities announced they had seized marijuana, Ecstasy, LSD, heroin, cocaine, meth and prescription drugs. Though it declined to divulge the quantities, the sheriff's office insisted that the amounts collected were beside the point: "The program is not designed to recover large amounts of drugs," it said in a statement to RS. "The program is designed to quell hand-to-hand narcotics transactions on campus." That evening, the big drug bust would be the talk of Southern California, with newscasts leading with the story – prominently featuring a dramatic photograph of a tall boy dressed in a gray hoodie and black Dickies, his hands cuffed behind his back, flanked by armed officers. Jesse Snodgrass had just become Operation Glasshouse's unlikely poster child.

## JESSE THOUGHT IT WAS A DREAM WHEN THE DOOR TO HIS CLASSROOM BURST OPEN AND OFFICERS RUSHED IN AND ARRESTED HIM.

time he asked to sit with a bunch of self-described "happy stoners." Daniel laughed along, joking back in a goofy voice, "Yeah, OK, you're all under arrest."

But Zipperstein disarmed kids with his frank approach, explaining, "I'm new, I don't have any friends here yet." He was quick to open up about his pretend personal life, telling kids he'd had to move from his dad's in Redlands to live with his irritating mother. "It's so hard to deal with my mom and shit," he said. "She's always bitching." To escape her tyranny, all he wanted to do was lock himself in his room and get high. Remembers student Perry Pickett, "I dunno, I felt bad for the kid." Girls thought it charming when Daniel said he still traveled to Redlands each weekend to visit his girlfriend – whose favorite activity, incidentally, was getting high together. "We were like, 'OK, that's romantic, I guess,'" says Jessica Flores, who sold him a gram or so of marijuana a half-dozen times. But although Daniel was in a relationship, that didn't stop him from admiring other girls, like when, during one lunch period with a

action necessary for a bust – and to keep the change. "I was like, 'All right, four bucks! That's a couple chicken sandwiches right there!'" says Perry. Meanwhile, Perry's 16-year-old friend Sebastian Eppinger, seeing how careless Daniel was with his money, thought he recognized an opportunity and agreed to act as a middleman. "I ripped him off superbad," says Sebastian. "I sold him 20 bucks' worth of weed for \$80."

Any skepticism about Daniel being a narc evaporated after Perry delivered him his Vicodin. Grinning and thanking him profusely, Daniel informed Perry and Sebastian he didn't swallow Vicodin, he smoked it. The boys were dubious, so Daniel described how he'd rub off the pill's coating, grind it to powder, then freebase it off tinfoil. To demonstrate, Daniel popped the pill into his mouth and sucked it, then spat it out and rubbed it on his shirt, explaining that it was now ready for crushing and smoking. "I heard you can do the same thing with *heroin*," Daniel said, dropping a hint about his next

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HY DO YOU THINK you're here?"

"I don't know," Jesse answered. "I was just called up and that's why I'm wondering." In a

plain-walled interrogation room at the Perris police station, near Temecula, Jesse sat stiffly in a chair, hands clenched. Across the table, hunched over a clipboard, sat a lean man with stringy blond hair, a plaid shirt and a police badge hanging from his neck. Jesse was anxious to clear up this whole misunderstanding and go home. For more than an hour, he'd been waiting in a common area in tense silence with 21 other kids, the vast majority of them Mexican-American boys, desperately studying their downcast faces for clues. None had been told the reason for their arrests and were forbidden to talk. Any time they'd made a sound, officers barked, "You better shut your mouth." Jesse had watched as one by one they'd been called into this little room, although one key nuance had eluded him: Each had emerged looking shocked and terrified; one girl had a full-blown panic attack.

"All right," said the deputy from the Riverside County Sheriff's Special Investigations Bureau, looking up from his clipboard. "Have you ever sold drugs?"

"No." Jesse was resolute.

"You sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure," answered Jesse. He'd been as compliant as possible with his answers, having waived his Miranda rights – though he hadn't entirely understood what he was agreeing to, he had said "yes" anyway to demonstrate his cooperation – but he could tell he was bombing this quiz. In his nervousness, Jesse already had been unable to recall his mom's phone number and his home address. He was, however, forthcoming when the officer asked if he'd ever used drugs, truthfully admitting that he'd once smoked pot, but that he just wasn't into it.

"Have you ever sold drugs at Chaparral High School?" the deputy asked.

"Nope."

"You never sold drugs to any students there?"

"No, sir," Jesse said respectfully.

"Mm-kay." Then, in a theatrical flourish that would be performed 22 times that day, the deputy crossed the interrogation room to open the door. "Do you know who *this* is?" he asked, as a uniformed police officer with short, neat hair walked in. Jesse did a double take.

"Daniel?" he asked the officer uncertainly. Deputy Daniel Zipperstein didn't answer but simply stood with his feet planted apart and his hands clasped in front of him, staring straight ahead. Jesse marveled at how different his friend appeared, nearly unrecognizable in these clothes and in this pose, so proud and tall. It was as

though Daniel had grown up overnight, looking so markedly different that when he made his dramatic entrance into Perry's interrogation, Perry exclaimed, "Do you have a younger brother at Chaparral?" making the officers guffaw. And yet even with Daniel standing over him like a statue and the interrogator looking amused from across the table, Jesse's mind struggled to knit the bits of information into a cohesive narrative.

"Am I getting in any trouble?" Jesse asked.

"Well, what do *you* think?" answered the deputy, snickering.

With that, the criminal-justice system intractably moved Jesse Snodgrass forward – even though, before leaving the interrogation room, the deputy had to walk the still-uncomprehending Jesse through the logic at play behind his crime: that Jesse had not merely given Daniel drugs; because Daniel had paid him, Jesse had, in fact, sold drugs. So confused was Jesse that upon leaving the station, he found himself loaded into a van with a half-dozen kids who'd admitted to having done drugs within the past 24 hours, en route to the hospital to have their vitals monitored. "Are you mentally retarded?" a cop at the hospital cautiously asked after Jesse droned down his list of psychiatric meds. When Jesse answered, "I have Asperger's," the officer groaned. Nonetheless, protocol being protocol, Jesse was shuttled onward to South-

west to make arrangements to drop off Jesse's meds. "They get three square meals and a bed. They love it here, and they keep coming back." The implication stung Catherine: that the kids locked inside – including her son – were already criminals, headed for a life of incarceration.

That was also the message of the district attorney's office in the courthouse two days later. According to Doug and Catherine, as all of the families somberly gathered to see their children for the first time since the arrest, Senior Deputy District Attorney Blaine Hopp strode into the center of the crowd. "This should be a wake-up call to all of you. Your children are drug dealers," he announced. "But this is an opportunity to save them," he added, inviting parents to speak with him before the proceedings began. To the Snodgrasses' surprise, many did. That didn't stop Hopp from arguing to the judge that each child posed a danger to the community and should therefore stay in custody longer – a frightening prospect to parents and kids alike.

When Jesse's turn came, he was charged with two felonies, one for each marijuana sale. Hopp argued that Jesse should remain locked up for an additional month, until his next court date – even though the probation department, having reviewed his history, had recommended his release. From their seats, the Snodgrasses listened aghast as Hopp lambasted their son as a menace to society, and got their first

## INCARCERATED, JESSE STRUGGLED WITH DANIEL'S BETRAYAL. "I THOUGHT WE WERE FRIENDS," HE MUMBLED TO FELLOW INMATES.

west Juvenile Hall, where he was placed in a holding cell to await booking – and where, by late afternoon, his distraught mother was on the phone with an officer, trying to reach her son.

"My son is self-injurious," Catherine pleaded. "If he hangs himself on your watch, it is your fault." Incredibly, Jesse's parents were never notified of their son's arrest, but learned of it when he didn't surface after school; a cascade of calls had finally put Doug in touch with the school principal, who informed him in a business-like way that Jesse had been arrested hours earlier. Both parents had been shocked, but like Jesse himself, they assumed this was some sort of fixable error. And yet to their horror, they'd come to discover that their son – a boy who scarcely left home – would now be detained for at least the next two days.

"You know, Mama, the kids here *love* it," a female officer told Catherine when she called the juvenile hall that first evening

glimpse of Jesse in his prison-issued orange jumpsuit. He didn't return their gaze. Jesse had regressed after spending three days and two nights in the juvenile prison system. And while incarcerated, he'd struggled to process Daniel's betrayal. "I thought we were really good friends," he kept mumbling to his fellow inmates, who had to explain the situation to him. When Jesse had finally been escorted into court, his expression was blank. Although desperate to see his parents, his eyes skipped right over them without recognition, a behavior they hadn't seen since his childhood. When the judge announced his immediate release, Jesse showed no sign that he had heard or understood.

At home, Jesse unraveled. For six weeks, he could barely summon language to speak and simply sat motionless, sometimes waving a hand in front of his face, much like when he was three years old. "I want to die," he managed to tell his parents at Christmastime, his face buried in his pil-

low. There were emergency therapy sessions and adjustments to his medication. His parents stayed up all night to keep watch. And in the midst of everything, the Snodgrasses received a letter from the Temecula Valley Unified School District, notifying them that in light of the allegations against Jesse and that he had sold drugs near campus, it was suspending him, and moving forward with his expulsion.

**F**EW FAMILIES IN THE SNODGRASSES' situation fight back. Even fewer speak out. "There's a lot of shame for the family, for your kid to be involved with a drug case," says Lynne Lyman, California state director of the Drug Policy Alliance. "The stigma is tremendous." But Catherine and Doug Snodgrass were atypical parents. They'd been fighting with school districts Jesse's entire life; in their younger days, they'd been union organizers. And the Snodgrasses were convinced they had no reason to hide. "We have nothing to be ashamed of, Jesse has nothing to be ashamed of," says Doug. "The people who do this, they're the ones who should be ashamed."

The criminal judge seemed inclined to agree, noting that Jesse's autism amounted to "unusual and exceptional circumstances." Jesse was sentenced to "informal probation," wherein if he kept out of trouble for six months and did 20 hours of community service, his record would be wiped clean. The Snodgrasses accepted the quickie plea deal rather than put Jesse through the stress of a trial – and because they were already waging a battle on a second front.

In an effort to stop the Temecula Valley Unified School District from expelling Jesse, the Snodgrasses appealed to the state's Office of Administrative Hearings. During a six-day hearing in February 2013, the school district dug in its heels on its right to expel Jesse for his crime, presenting a parade of witnesses – including members of Jesse's trusted school support team – to insist that despite Jesse's autism, the boy knew right from wrong, and therefore should have been able to resist the undercover cop's entreaties. The district's director of Child Welfare and Attendance, Michael Hubbard, who was one of only three district administrators with foreknowledge of the sting, further testified that his faith in Operation Glasshouse was so complete that he'd felt fine about Jesse's arrest. "I didn't believe it was coercion or entrapment for any of the kids," Hubbard testified.

In March last year, Judge Marian Tully's 19-page ruling excoriated the school district for setting Jesse up to fail. "The district placed Student in an extremely difficult social-problem scenario that would have been difficult even for typical high school students," she wrote, much less a special-needs kid. Chastising the district

for "leaving Student to fend for himself, anxious and alone, against an undercover police officer," she ordered that Jesse be returned to school immediately.

Yet Jesse's victories did little to ease his frayed mental state as he headed back to Chaparral High School. He shook with anxiety in the car on the drive there and hadn't yet overcome his new habit of crumpling to the floor anytime they passed a police car. During the three-month suspension since his arrest, Jesse had been overwhelmed by paranoia so great that once when their doorbell rang, he tackled his mother to the floor, begging, "Don't answer!" Plagued by panic attacks and nightmares – the back of his left hand was gouged by a deep groove where he'd anxiously scratched himself raw – Jesse had been diagnosed with PTSD. He was frightened to be back at Chaparral, where the other kids stared and counselors who'd testified against him now smiled at him, and where, to his parents' disbelief, the school district had filed an appeal of the administrative ruling – it was still fighting to expel him.

Despite all that, Jesse was dimly aware that he had it pretty good compared to his fellow arrestees: Of the 22 kids arrested, he's apparently the only one still getting a traditional education. "Every one of us got expelled," says Perry, who now attends a reform school, along with most of the others caught in the sting. Others took their expulsion as a cue to drop out, like Madalyn, who now lives in L.A., working as a receptionist for an HVAC company. She was only three classes shy of a high school diploma. "So close," she says wistfully. But while less than thrilled about their day-to-day lives, they're grateful to have escaped worse fates, since Perry, Sebastian, Jessica and Madalyn, like many of the kids, pleaded guilty in exchange for no further jail time; their juvenile criminal records will be sealed. That puts them in a luckier boat than the two students who happened to have been 18 at the time of their crimes and were treated as adults: One, charged with selling marijuana and meth, spent 30 days in a men's jail, at which point he threw himself upon the mercy of the court and was sentenced to residential rehab; the second boy, charged with three marijuana sales, was sentenced to two years in county jail.

Stings like these can have a long-term impact on kids, sometimes in devastating ways. Research shows that juvenile arrests predict brushes with the law as adults. "These kinds of practices push students out of school and toward the criminal-justice system," says state director Lyman, noting that minority, special-needs and poor children are particularly at risk. "It's known as the school-to-prison pipeline."

Persuaded by the high potential for bad outcomes for kids, and by the lack of evidence of good results for communities, the

National Association of School Safety and Law Enforcement Officials has concluded that undercover high school operations are usually a poor strategy. "We're more interested in getting kids help that need it, rather than targeting kids to be locked up," says former police chief Larry Johnson, president-elect of NASSLEO. Even the birthplace of these stings, Los Angeles, has backed off the tactic; after the school district began openly questioning its efficacy in 2004, the LAPD abruptly shut down its 30-year-old undercover School Buy program.

Nevertheless, Riverside County is undeterred. This past December – one year after the raid that arrested Jesse Snodgrass – the sheriff's department announced yet another successful undercover operation: a semester-long sting that nabbed 25 high school students in the nearby cities of Perris and Meniffee, most for small amounts of marijuana. Among the arrestees was reportedly a 15-year-old special-ed student who reads at a third-grade level, arrested for selling a single Vicodin pill for \$3, which he used to buy snacks. Perris Superintendent Jonathan Greenberg has called the operation "an unqualified success."

The Snodgrasses don't want their experience to be in vain and are now suing the Temecula Valley Unified School District, accusing it of negligence for allowing their son to be targeted despite his disabilities. "We think that we can make these operations stop," says Doug. "We want to use this to send a message to administrators everywhere. When they're approached by police departments about having an undercover operation at their school, they'll remember a district got sued."

Reflecting on his experience as the target of an undercover drug sting, Jesse still doesn't know quite what to make of it. "They were actually out to get us," Jesse says, sounding mystified as he swigs a protein shake; because of his PTSD, he still sometimes finds himself unable to eat and wants to regain some of the weight he's lost. He managed to graduate this past December and has started a job in construction. In the meantime, he has gleaned a few important lessons from the ordeal: "To not trust everyone you see," he says thoughtfully. Through his friend's harsh betrayal, he has come to understand that people aren't always what they appear to be, a cruel but necessary lesson that all children must learn sometime. He has realized that even adults are capable of acting with terrible unkindness and duplicity. Jesse's insights have made him wary of meeting new people, fearful of hidden motives, which, as he now knows, his disabilities make him powerless to detect. And Jesse learned one more valuable lesson.

"I mean, the Riverside County Sheriff's Department, they taught me how to buy pot," he says, and breaks into a grin. 