

He's Not Crazy, He's Our Neighbor

In Montana, Ted Kaczynski's acquaintances insist he was
normal

David S. Jackson

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The cabin is gone now, packed up by FBI agents, its perimeter ringed by a chain-link fence with a KEEP OUT sign that only the occasional rabbit and passing deer will see. A few feet away, the garden that Ted Kaczynski once tended so carefully has gone to ruin; the red bicycle that he rode four miles down a dirt road into town lies in pieces, rusting and overgrown with weeds. In the town of Lincoln, Mont., no one talks much about the ex-neighbor, the Unabomber suspect. Only strangers ask about him. But two weeks ago, two strangers showed up at the small strip of grocery stores, churches and cafes along State Route 200, and they had questions about Kaczynski.

Was he mentally ill? Or not? The inquisitive visitors were two prosecution psychiatrists, and the answers they got may not help the “mental defect” defense that Kaczynski’s lawyers are planning for his trial, which starts Nov. 12. “I can’t imagine anybody saying he’s insane,” says Becky Garland, 41, who befriended Kaczynski while working at Garland’s Town & Country store in Lincoln. “You might say that anyone who makes mail bombs is insane. But insane by law? I don’t think he was that.”

Her sister Teresa, who still works in the store, said she knew “Ted didn’t have much of a childhood, that he was very unhappy because he always had to study, and he didn’t spend much time around other people.” But she has no doubts about his sanity, and she told the psychiatrists so. “They wanted to know if we felt he was normal when he came into town,” she says. “And I think it’s fair to say that, yes, he was.”

Dan Rundell, who gave Kaczynski a bicycle and got a rare tour of the hermit’s garden-irrigation system in return, had the same impression. “I always thought that he acted, for a person who was a recluse, well within the bounds of society. He always seemed a little jumpy. But I put that down to the fact that he was not a social person.”

In Helena, about 60 miles southeast of Lincoln, the psychiatrists met with Jack McCabe, owner of the Park Hotel, where Kaczynski stayed 31 times since 1980. “They wanted to know what he was like, if he caused any trouble,” McCabe said afterward. “But Ted Kaczynski never bothered me any. I figured he was some rancher from up in Lincoln who wanted to get away to the big town for a day or two. Lot of them did.”

Because of the abundance of physical evidence in the case, many legal observers have assumed that his lawyers would try to raise questions about his mental state at some point in the trial, either in the guilt phase or during the penalty phase that would follow a conviction, in an attempt to avoid a death sentence. But proving such a defense is difficult. Instead of arguing that he was insane, Kaczynski’s lawyers seem to be planning a defense that he suffered from a mental defect that impaired his ability to form an intent to commit the crimes. Nevertheless, as far as his old neighbors seem to think, Ted Kaczynski, the former math professor, was gentle, soft-spoken and painfully shy. Last Friday Kaczynski’s lawyers said he was refusing to submit to court-ordered psychiatric testing at the federal prison in Dublin, Calif., where he is awaiting trial.

The defense lawyers have been waging a stubborn but losing battle to keep out all the evidence found in Kaczynski’s mountainside cabin. They are certain to raise more questions when the trial begins, but unless some unexpected decision turns their way, they are going to have to explain to the jury why the FBI says his home contained

such items as a fully constructed bomb, the Unabomber's manifesto, the typewriter it was typed on and, most damaging of all, handwritten journals in which Kaczynski recorded virtually every bombing. Last week prosecutors released excerpts, including one that read, "I sent these devices during 1993. They detonated as they should have."

His attorneys may have little choice but to reach for a mental-disease or -defect defense. Says Joseph Russoniello, a former U.S. Attorney in San Francisco: "The defense will need people on that jury who are either incredibly gullible, or cynical, to argue that this fellow did not know the difference between right and wrong. He used incredible genius and guile and eluded law-enforcement officials for all this time. And would have until this day if it weren't for his family's turning him in." Back in Lincoln, many of Kaczynski's old friends are glad that a jury, not they, will decide his fate. But they still have questions. Says Teresa Garland, leaning back from the cash register at her store: "I've always wanted to just sit down and ask him, 'Why?'"

The Ted K Archive

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