

Hot Type

hotype@chicagoreader.com
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He Walks the Line

Jamie Kalven calls himself a reporter. But don't insult him by calling him objective.

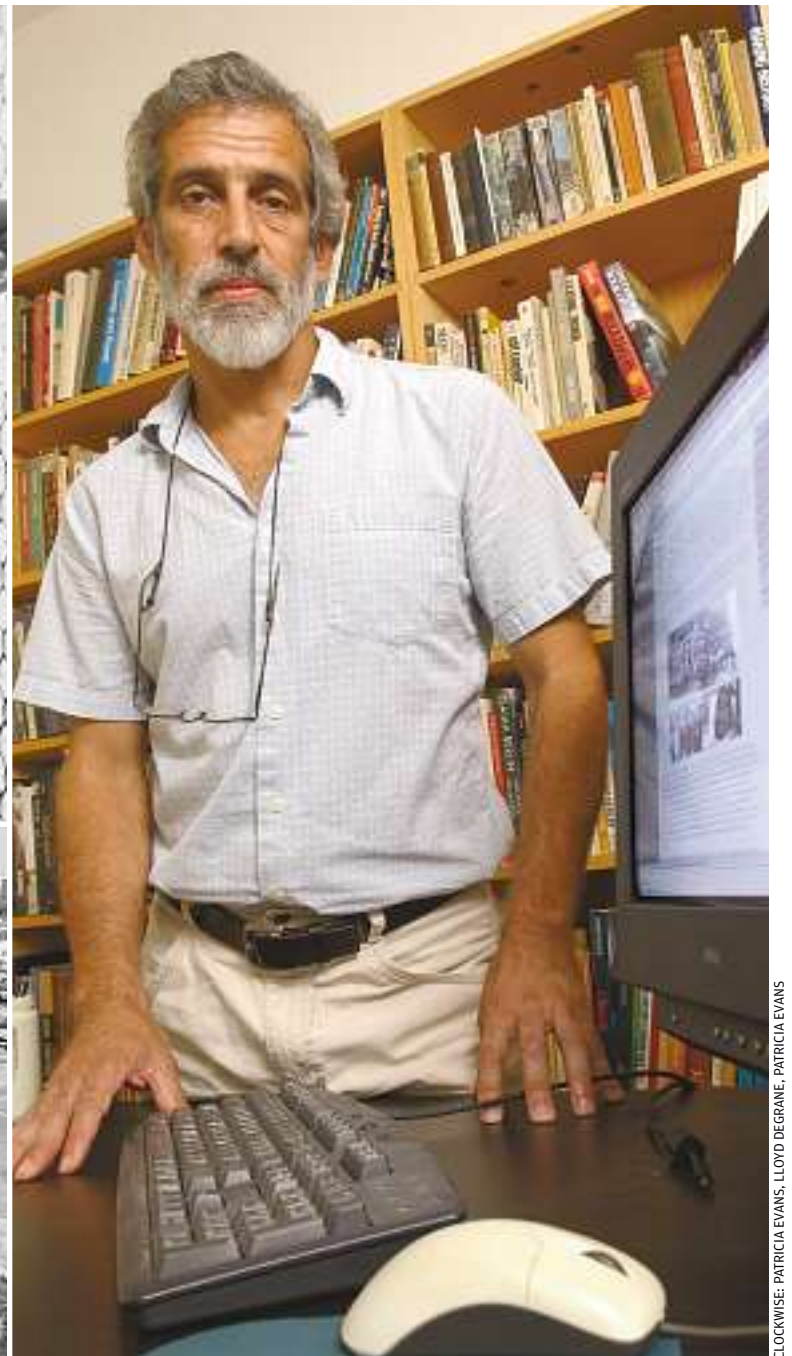
By Michael Miner

A lawsuit pending in federal court tells a tale of abuse in a doomed Chicago housing project. Spun out over several weeks, the same story is now being repeated on a Web site in vastly greater but equally partisan detail. Journalism is normally more disinterested. "I recognize we're pushing the envelope with this," says the author, Jamie Kalven.

The tale's plaintiff and protagonist is Diane Bond, a 50-year-old resident of the only surviving high-rise in the Stateway Gardens housing project. The primary defendants are five Chicago police officers who allegedly "engaged in a pattern of abuse" in south-side housing projects. The suit alleges that from April 2003 to March 2004 these officers "invaded the sanctity, safety, and comfort of her home. They violated her body in multiple acts of sexual abuse. They threatened to plant drugs on her and to arrest her on false charges. They desecrated religious items sacred to her. They verbally assaulted her with racial and gender-based epithets . . .

"They beat and choked her. They beat her teenaged son. They forced her to watch as they coerced her son to beat another member of her community. The defendants committed each and every one of these acts with the knowledge that they would be treated with impunity and with absolute confidence that Ms. Bond would be powerless to stop their abuse."

As the two sides waited for the assigned judge, Joan Lefkow, to return to the bench after a long absence, Bond's attorney, Craig Futterman of the



Clockwise: Diane Bond, Jamie Kalven, Stateway Gardens, 2001

Mandel Legal Aid Clinic of the University of Chicago Law School, filed an amended version of the 20-month-old suit. He added three new defen-

dants: a former administrator at the Office of Professional Standards, police superintendent Philip Cline, and the city of Chicago. Their failure to prop-

erly oversee the police department, the suit alleges, made it easier for the five officers to violate Bond's civil rights.

"I'm deeply implicated in the

Bond case," Kalven e-mailed me. "I documented the abuses. I persuaded the Mandel Clinic to represent Ms. Bond. I'm on the plaintiff's witness list. And

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The Straight Dope® by Cecil Adams

As a veteran consumer of butter, jam, and toast, I find it a continuing source of irritation that the side of the toast upon which I put the jam and butter is almost always the side that hits the kitchen floor when the toast slips off the plate. What I'm curious to know is, is there a statistically larger chance of the toast's falling on its buttered side rather than the plain side? Or is it merely my mind playing "the van is always at the corner" on me? —Hans W., Copenhagen, Denmark

“How does our solidarity with those we report on affect our reliability as reporters?” Kalven wonders online, using, as he often does, the collective *we*. “Does it distort our vision? Or does it perhaps afford us access to perception?”

for several years I have been investigating the crew of officers involved.” This month he's describing the case in installments on his Web site, viewfromtheground.com. “I blur the distinction between journalists and bloggers,” Kalven told me. “I am a bona fide journalist who is publishing primary reporting (as opposed to commentary) in the blogosphere.”

Six years ago Kalven published *Working With Available Light*, a book about his marriage after his wife was raped. *Kicking the Pigeon*, his online narrative about Diane Bond, doesn't get that personal, but there's a resemblance. Kalven has known Bond for years; as an adviser to the Stewaway Gardens residents' council, he had an office in her building until it was closed for demolition in 2002.

He writes, “Being forced to expose herself while [Chicago police] threatened her was 'like a dry rape,' Diane Bond told me

the day after the April 28 [2003] incident. She mentioned then that she had suffered violence at the hands of men when she was a girl. Later she told me the full story.

“It has been my fate as a man and as a journalist to hear many such stories. Inevitably, I feel a tension between my hunger for the details—details that may obscure more than they reveal—and the desire to cover my ears. I resist entering imaginatively into the experience of being rendered utterly powerless. Although I am acutely aware of this dynamic, I still must work to resist seizing on details that explain why the victim was raped. My impulse is not so much to blame the victim as it is to find a way to differentiate myself and those close to me from the suffering person before me.”

Kalven's imagination surrendered to Bond's experience. He writes: “[Cop A] came into the hall and yelled at her, ‘Shut up, cunt.’ He slapped her across the face, then kicked her in the ribs. In the course of searching the apartment, the officers threw Bond's belongings on the floor, breaking her drinking glasses. [Cop A] knocked to the floor a large picture of a brown-skinned Jesus that sits atop a standing lamp in a corner of the living room. ‘Would you pick up my Jesus picture?’ Bond appealed to him. ‘Fuck Jesus,’ Replied [Cop A], ‘and you too, you cunt bitch.’”

In perfunctory disclaimers that follow this passage and others like it, Kalven states that the narratives were based on interviews (principally with Bond) and on the lawsuit, and that the five officers—Robert Stegmiller, Christ Savickas,

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People in Denmark are just now noticing this, which has been the subject of rueful commentary elsewhere in the world since at least 1884? Time to get you guys up to speed:

1. Prodigious scientific resources (seriously) have been brought to bear on this phenomenon. Browsing through the literature from 1995 on, I count six articles and a book.

2. By far the grandest conclusions to date have been drawn by UK physicist and science journalist Robert A.J. Matthews, who sees in tumbling toast a demonstration of Murphy's Law (“If anything can go wrong, it will”) and by extension the ineluctable perversity of the universe. (Actually, he says “innate cussedness of the universe,” which is to my mind too mild coming at the end of a paper [*European Journal of Physics*, 1995] that drags in the electronic fine structure constant, the mass of the proton, and the speed of light.)

3. Momentarily digressing, we note that Matthews attributes Murphy's Law to an honest-to-God person named Murphy, specifically U.S. Air Force captain Edward A. Murphy, whose assistant apparently hooked up the electrodes wrong during rocket-sled tests in 1949. Initially I was reluctant to credit this too- neat account because its source was a BBC-TV program, which admittedly was by the BBC but on the other hand was still TV. However, evidence turned up online squares with Matthews's take: while the basic proposition expressed by the law is ancient, Captain Murphy and associates may have given it its modern formulation.

4. According to popular belief, toast always falls butter side down because of the weight and aerodynamic properties of the butter. Orthodox scientific thought holds that popular belief is moronic and that toast falls butter side down only half the time, as a matter of chance; we think otherwise because we selectively



the gist of which is that (a) bipedal creatures such as ourselves can't be more than three meters tall or we'd dash our brains out when falling due to mathematically demonstrable physical constraints; (b) the height of a table necessarily is about half human height and thus has an upper bound of 1.5 meters, which is within the gotta-fall-butter-side-down range; therefore, (c) toast falling butter side down is

as much a manifestation of implacable physical laws as the orbits of the planets. This is the part where protons, the speed of light, etc come in, leading one to think: This guy has really been hitting the mai tais.

remember the times when it happens—the “van is always at the corner” effect. The BBC seemingly confirmed OST by flinging toast into the air and noting the random distribution of results. However, according to Matthews, this merely reflects gormless journalists' failing to grasp the nub of the problem—you don't fling toast, it falls off your plate. In fact, he demonstrates, tipping off a table causes the falling toast to rotate on its way down; but since the average table is only 30 inches high, the toast doesn't have time to rotate 270 degrees from the horizontal before impact. As a moment's thought will show, toast that starts out butter side up and rotates between 90 and 270 degrees en route earthward is going to wind up butter side down. (The weight of the butter is a nonfactor.) A simple enough conclusion, but it takes Matthews 15 numbered equations to get there.

5. Matthews then launches into an ambitious effort to relate falling toast to the fundamental structure of the universe,

6. Impressive (if eccentric) as the foregoing is, a later paper (Bacon et al, *American Journal of Physics*, 2001) says Matthews and others reporting similar results have spent too much time noodling with equations and not enough time in the lab. (Key failing: inadequate consideration of toast slippage.) Experiments using video analysis software, “sophisticated modeling programs . . . to facilitate the numerical solution of nonlinear differential equations,” and videotapes of actual falling toast (well, a plywood substitute for toast, the natural variability of the real thing rendering it unsuitable for precision work) show that butter-side-downness is far from the sure thing claimed by earlier investigators and may be closer to the 50-50 rate posited a priori by OST per #4 above.

7. In short, we're pretty much back where we started. You dream of the ultimo Theory of Everything? Bah. We can't get past toast.

Comments, questions? Take it up with Cecil on the Straight Dope Message Board, www.straightdope.com, or write him at the Chicago Reader, 11 E. Illinois, Chicago 60611. Cecil's most recent compendium of knowledge, *Triumph of the Straight Dope*, is available at bookstores everywhere.



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Hot Type

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Andrew Schoeff, Edwin Utreras, and Joseph Seinitz—"deny having any contact with Ms. Bond" on the dates given.

But the terms of what Kalven calls his "extended narrative inquiry" posit the officers' guilt. By the beginning of this week he'd posted eight installments of *Kicking the Pigeon*, and he had half a dozen to go. He'd begun considering the sociology of Stateway Gardens and the structure of the police department. Later he intends to go on to other cases. He wants to post an exhaustive answer to a barely hypothetical question he's posed online: "If a group of rogue police officers operated for years in Chicago public housing with impunity, what conditions would be required to make possible their criminal careers?"

Kalven understands that his involvement in the story changes the story. "How does our solidarity with those we report on affect our reliability as reporters?" he wonders online, using, as he often does, the collective "we." "Does it distort our

vision? Or does it perhaps afford us access to perception? These are legitimate questions. . . . We make no claims to journalistic 'objectivity.' We do aspire to intellectual rigor."

Readers will ask these questions too. Some will conclude that intellectual rigor demands more than he provides, that it obliges him to write more cautiously and to at least attempt to consider the officers' side of the story.

Last month the corporation counsel's office, which is defending the officers, subpoenaed Kalven's notes, tapes, and other documents concerning Stateway Gardens. Kalven refused to turn them over. In his response to the city he invoked the idea of a reporter's privilege, but he knows that his stand is nothing like Judith Miller's. He argues that he's not protecting a secret source; he's protecting his freedom of association. Because he's been a fixture at Stateway Gardens for so many years, he's trusted there; and because he's trusted, he knows much more about the residents than the police do.

"Lots of my sources and contacts are people engaged in criminal activity," he says. "The first question in my deposition—after the questions about Diane Bond—was, 'Was so-and-so engaged in drug traffic?'"

Kalven refused to say. He's certain that if he answers questions like that, he'll never be welcome back at Stateway Gardens.

A Moratorium

Columnist Dennis Byrne wrote in the *Chicago Tribune* on July 4: "Among those who would pull us back to that sorry time is Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.), with his clumsy, irresponsible and inaccurate attempt to equate the Iraq war with the Vietnam War."

Striving to achieve vivid yet no-nonsense invective, our pundits draw time and again from a shallow well.

"The Republican majorities . . . cobbled together a budget that was so woefully irresponsible . . . that the easiest—and, we would still argue, wisest—

response to the document was a full veto by Gov. Jim Doyle." —editorial, *Capital Times*, July 22.

"State workers may deserve a 6 percent raise, but legislators will be acting irresponsibly if they give them one." —editorial, *Mobile Register*, July 23.

"Since 1990, however, the Legislature has siphoned off funds and managed it irresponsibly." —editorial, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 20.

"It would be irresponsible not to give voters a say." —columnist Jim Wooten, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, July 19.

"Maybe Rove could join Tom Cruise in his irresponsible views of psychiatry." —editorial, *Weymouth News*, July 9.

"With the heavy financial burdens the majority of Americans already carry, it is irresponsible for the federal government to expect us to bear this one as well." —guest editorial by Judge Greg Mathis, *Chicago Defender*, July 8.

"There was no misunderstanding, Senator. Your irresponsible diatribe referencing an e-mail from an unnamed FBI agent was crystal clear." —editorial,

Amarillo Globe-News, June 22.

"The budget plan . . . is radically irresponsible." —editorial, *Wisconsin State Journal*, June 22.

Pundits, stop. Don't exhaust the language of bombast. Think of the next generation.

Team Reporting

Stella Foster:

"Singer R. Kelly and private eye Ernie Rizzo at Tavern on Rush . . ." —*Sun-Times*, July 5.

"R. Kelly ('Trapped in the Closet') and music mainstay George Daniels chillin' at the Tavern on Rush . . ." —*Sun-Times*, July 12.

"Singer R. Kelly parked his mucho expensive Maybach in front of Tavern on Rush, where he had dinner." —*Sun-Times*, July 19.

Abdon Pallasch:

"The girl in the alleged R. Kelly sex video was only 14 years old when it was made, the girl's best friend testified Wednesday." —*Sun-Times*, July 21. **■**



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