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Witch on death row

Damien Echols contends his only crime was being different.

By Mara Leveritt

TUCKER — In a two-and-a half-hour interview last week in the stark setting of the Maximum Security Unit's visitation room, Damien Echols said that until television news reported the killings, he had never heard of Steve Branch, Chris Byers, or Michael Moore, the three 8-year-old boys whose bodies were found, one of them mutilated, in a ditch in a wooded area of West Memphis a year ago last May.

But even at that early stage in the case, Echols recalled, the TV news reporter said detectives were compiling a psychological profile of the type of person who might commit such a crime. "I told my mom, 'Watch. You wait and see. They're going to be here,' " he said. "And they showed up about an hour later. They asked me, 'Why do you think somebody would have done something like this?' "

Seated behind a glass window with a small screen for voices to cross, Echols described his life and the circumstances he believes led police to his door--a visit that resulted a year later in his being sentenced to death. His demeanor was quietly intense; his hair and eyes dark; his voice, cuffed hands and slightly fidgeting fingers all soft. Since his trail last March he has grown a wisp of a beard and mustache.

"I did not kill anyone," Echols said at one point in the interview. "And I'm to the point now where I don't care if people believe me or not."

Despite such professed indifference, Echols is generally cooperating with his attorneys in pursuing his appeals. At their request, he denied interviews to several other media. Although the attorneys also advised against an interview with the *Arkansas Times*, Echols insisted.

He answered questions freely, speaking in complete, quiet sentences. Occasionally he relaxed into a little laugh. Mostly, though, he sounded like a kid with a bad case of existential angst, the sort of thing that frequently clears up with one's complexion--or ends in suicide.

But Echols' case is no romantic opera. He was here on death row when the state of Arkansas took out two of its other residents and executed them last May. Here, worries about issues of being and death are more than idle musings.

"I have no idea where I was born," he says, when asked to begin at the beginning. He does know the date: Dec. 11, 1974.

"We moved around a lot. I've lived in Arkansas, Tennessee, Texas, Louisiana, Maryland--too many states to name. I have no idea why we moved so much. We just did. "My father usually worked as the manager of something--a restaurant or a gas station--and one day he'd come home and tell my mother to pack up because we were leaving. Most of the time, he wouldn't give any notice.

"Since we moved around so much, I never really hung around people my own age. I was a loner. That's the way I liked it, though. I liked being with people for short periods of time, but I liked being by myself more. I like the quiet, and I like the time to think. And I like to read. Books and music are my entire life."

Echols listed as his current favorites "anything by Anne Rice, Stephen King, J.R.R. Tolkien, Dean Koontz--and anything on World War II." In music, he said, "some days I like Metallica, Anthrax, Megadeath, Slayer; music like that. When I'm in a another mood, I'll listen to U2, REM, Pink Floyd. I love The Doors, Pearl Jam, Nirvana."

But that's getting ahead...

During his childhood, when his family was so transient, the teenager known now as Damien Echols was named Michael Wayne Hutchinson. He lived with his mother and father until their divorce, when he was 8. He recalls their marriage, not as particularly stormy, but difficult. "I don't know what it was," he says. "I think they were just too young when they got married."

Soon, his mother married Jack Echols, an older man who later adopted the boy. "He's good," Ehcols says of his adoptive father. "He's old-fashioned, the type of a guy you think of living on a farm, getting up in the morning and taking care of crops."

The family settled in Echols' home in West Memphis, where Echols attended school. He liked school, he says, wishes he were taking classes now. He liked science, especially biology. At 13, Michael dropped the name of his father, whom by then he hadn't seen for five years, and took Echols as his last name.

But there were other changes as well. By junior high, Echols had also begun assuming the persona that, a few years later, would attract police attention.

He notes, "I was called a witch long before I considered myself to be one." He says classmates called him "witch" as early as seventh grade, "because of my black clothes, and the things I would read, and because I kept to myself."

That was "witch" in the weird sense of the word.

Echols' grades, which had been good, began to slide. "By the time I got to high school," he says with a sardonic chuckle," I could make a sheet of notebook paper last for a week."

His relationship with his mother also began to deteriorate.

"Up until I was 15, it seemed my mom and I were sort of the same person. I could tell what she was thinking. I always knew how she felt. I was really, really close to her. Then that changed. We began to argue constantly.

"I hated it," he shrugs. "Now I think it was just typical teen-ager stuff."

Much of what Echols began doing and experiencing, however, was not typical. He stood out, he knew it, and the more he did, the more he cultivated his outsider image.

"When I was in school, I was a complete freak. I wore the stupidest looking clothes," he says. "I wasn't popular with everyone, but everyone knew who I was." As Echols remembers those days, most of the other students were interested in "money, cars, clothes--only in material things. I didn't have anything whatsoever in common with them."

He proclaimed his separateness by wearing black, including a long black overcoat, even in the heat of summer. Asked why, he smiles slightly.

"The main reason is I thought I looked good in black. I just liked it. It was sort of my style." Then the smile wanes and he adds, "I think it was also because I was depressed."

Echols remembers one teacher in high school who broke through his isolation. Steve Baca taught physical science and algebra.

"A lot of the teachers didn't like me because of the way I dressed, and because of the music I liked." Echols says. "But Mr. Baca wasn't like that at all. He would sit and talk to you and treat you like were a human being. He would listen to your ideas, even if they were different from his own." The two discussed music, books, homelife and friends, Echols says. "He's the one who got me interested in Pink Floyd."

As a child, Echols had not been raised in any particular religion, and now questions of philosophy and theology began to trouble him as well. His adoptive father, Jack Echols, had taken Michael on several occasions to his church. The teen-ager remembers it as being "maybe Nazarene--one of those churches where people scream and roll their eyes and roll around on the floor." He stops and interjects quickly," I would like to make it clear I am not putting those people down."

Echols says he didn't like the preaching, but did enjoy the Sunday school classes, mainly as a chance to show off. "I'm familiar with Bible history, and I'd sit there thinking, here I am, I'm not even a Christian, and I know more about their Bible than they do."

He says he and Jack Echols went to the church "often at first," until , for himself, "I guess laziness took over."

He says he also found it hard to believe "I wanted it all to be true, but it was so illogical, nothing connected. I wanted so bad to believe, because the way it was put to me, this is the ultimate truth and if you didn't believe it , you were going to hell for eternity. But now I think that was just scare tactics."

"You want to say, 'God, if you're really there, show me.' But then they'll tell you no, you have to take it on faith."

From then on, Echols says, he investigated several religions, including Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism--and then he turned to Catholicism. "I read anything I could find, in libraries, and books, pamphlets and fliers. What got me interested was the succession of Popes. I thought, 'This has got to be the mother church, the real thing. Maybe if I go there, I'll be able to believe.' "

He attended classes at St. Michael's Catholic Church in West Memphis for about a year, was baptized and received Communion.

"For a while, I was real devout. I'd go to mass every Sunday and I'd go often on weekdays too, because when I first started and nothing was clicking, I thought, it's me. I've got to try harder."

As Echols recounts it , he decided to change his name again, adopting the name of Father Damien, a 19th-centrury Catholic priest from Flanders who cared for lepers on the Hawaiian island of Molokai. "I thought this guy must have been holy," Echols says. "He must have known the answers. He gave his like to his faith."

Echols bristles when asked about reports that he took the name Damien from a character in a series of horror movies. "Those are the tackiest movies I have ever seen," he fumes. "Those movies are a disgrace. I was trying to be holy, so why in the hell would I name myself after the anti-Christ? Even at my trial, I had people come up to me and say my son's name was Satanic."

(The baby, born shortly before the trial, is named Damien Seth Azariah. Asked the origins of Azariah, Echols explains. "I read this book one time about this farmer who had a cat names Azariah, and I liked the name.")

But taking the name of Damien didn't do it for Catholicism, either. He continued his search, he says, until he found his way to paganism, and ancient form of worship that, though persecuted for centuries, is currently experiencing a resurgence in many countries, including the U.S.

"I had read a lot about it, even while I was into Catholicism," he says of his introduction to paganism. "I was interested in Stonehenge. It aroused my curiosity. So then I went and looked up the Druids. I would go off on, like, research binges."

He read that paganism had existed before Christianity. "I figured, if they're the first, maybe they were right and we've just strayed off the path."

Even in the predominately Christian atmosphere of West Memphis, information about paganism was available. "I'd be talking to somebody, and they'd say, 'Hey, I know somebody else reading that. Y'all are into the same stuff--even though they didn't know what the 'stuff' was. So I met a lot of people that way, but I was never part of an organized coven myself."

To Echols, paganism amounts to a "worship of nature--earth, air, water, fire; all the elements. I may not agree with everything pagans teach, but what I believe is logical. We have to come from somewhere. And certain things, like karma, can be proven."

Echols becomes almost animated by the subject. "We know scientifically that every action has an equal and opposite reaction. What is that but karma? That is karma."

"Things don't have to happen in the next life. They can just as well happen now. And usually they do. Whatever is in your heart is going to come out. Your actions create a train or a trail, whether it's good or bad, and it follows you all your life."

"Pagans teach we are all here for a purpose. Like me, being in this prison. Maybe there is somebody I'm supposed to meet of something I'm supposed to do that would never happen unless I came to prison."

Of course, back in high school, when he first encountered these ideas, he never imagined a karma that would lead him to prison. As he tells it, he had entered a prison of his own.

Despite the comfort he took in paganism--and by now also in girlfriends--Echols remained lodged in despair. Between 1991 and 1993, he says, he attempted suicide several times, by cutting, hanging, overdosing, and even attempting to drown himself.

He viewed the human race as generally "stupid" and people "pathetic." He says, "I kept thinking, 'I've looked at life, and what I've seen of it so far, it's worthless.' "

In the Spring of 1992, when he was 17, Echols' girlfriend at the time told him her parents had found out that they were having sex and gave her an ultimatum: Stop seeing him or leave home. The two decided to run away.

Echols now admits he has "no idea" where they were going to go or how they would survive. The night of their departure, on the last day of school, they took shelter in an abandoned house in West Memphis. Someone apparently saw them. Police arrived within an hour.

It was Echols' first brush with the law.

"They arrested me and they gave me a bunch of tests--ink blot and word-association, that kind of thing," he says. "And they sent me to a hospital."

That moment, Echols believes, was pivotal. It not only brought him to the attention of Police, but it was the first time he met Jerry Driver, chief juvenile probation officer for Crittenden County and the man Echols now believes later "turned this entire [murder] investigation against me."

"He's been after me for a long, long time," Echols says. "He thinks that everything that happens in Arkansas is somehow connected with some satanic act."

"In his mind, it's all Satanism. Everything that's not Baptist is satanic. Twenty-four hours a day he's looking for satanic activity. I think he thinks this is some evil thing that's taking over America, and it's his job to put a stop to it."

"Even when I first met Driver, he was on this satanic trip," Echols says. "He started asking me questions about Satan once, so I started trying to explain to him..."

Echols says he tried to explain that "wicca" or "witch" were old words for followers of paganism; that the practice of paganism has nothing to so with Satan; that Satan exists in Christian, not pagan, belief.

Echols shrugs. He says Driver had his own agenda. "He's always looking for something that's not there. He'd be nice to me to my face, but he'd tell everyone I knew, 'Stay away from him because he's going down.' "

In many ways, Echols was already going down. After his arrest in the abandoned house, he was sent to Charter Hospital in Maumelle, where he was diagnosed as manic-depressive, with suicidal tendencies.

"Looking back, I think it was an accurate diagnosis," he says. "I know I had suicidal tendencies. And I probably was manic-depressive."

"I spent 24 hours a day in complete and utter despair. I had no hope. I didn't want to sleep. I couldn't eat."

As to the cause, he says, "I think to myself a lot. I'll sit around and think, maybe we'll all die and we'll still not know the answers to any of our questions." Echols says he left the hospital "about as depressed as when I went in."

The stay at Charter was Echols' first psychiatric treatment. A doctor there prescribed Trofanil, an antidepressant, which Echols says he took from then until his arrival on death row. (Off the drug, now, he claims to "feel better than I have in years." He says that, even though he also admits to, at times, still feeling suicidal.)

The months after Echols left Charter unfolded in a hurry. His mother and Jack Echols were divorced. She remarried his natural father. They notified local authorities, because Echols was on probation, and moved to Portland,Ore. --some pretty radical changes.

Yet, Echols recalls, "Nothing about the way I felt had changed, so I drank constantly. I had a bottle in my hand all the time. It got to the point one night that my mom yelled at me, that if I was going to kill myself, just get it over with. That night, I think I'd locked myself in my room."

Echols has a hard time explaining his father's reaction to his behavior. He had never previously abused alcohol. "I don't think he... I could tell by the way he was acting that it hurt him, but he didn't know what to do. He hadn't known me for so long."

The Portland police were called. "This time they treated me for depression and they put me in alcohol rehabilitation," Echols says. "But the place they put me was more like an asylum. I mean, they'd lock you in a big room with people playing checkers with people only they could see."

"One time my folks came to visit me and I told them to go away. The doctor called me in and said, 'Your parents are here.' I said, 'That's impossible. I have no parents.' "

"I stayed a week. I told the doctor, 'You can keep me here for eternity, but it won't help.' And she said, 'There's nothing we can do for you then.' and a half hour later I was walking down the steps. I got on a bus and came back to Arkansas. "

(In Oregon, Echols had reported to Portland authorities, as required under terms of his probation. Records from juvenile officers there indicate that when he left, they were informed that he was returning to Arkansas and that they in turn notified Driver's office in Arkansas of that fact. There is no record in the Arkansas files that anyone entered that information.)

Back in West Memphis, Echols moved in with a friend from high school. The boy's mother set up a condition on his stay that Echols returns to school.

When he tried to return, however, Echols says, school officials turned him away, telling him he needed a note from his parents to be readmitted. As he was walking away from the school, Driver appeared and arrested him. The complaint he filed says Echols violated the terms of his probation "by threatening the life of his mother and father [while in Oregon] and by refusing to obey their lawful orders." It adds, "Mr. Echols has since continued to violate the terms of his probation by moving from the home of his parents back to Marion, Arkansas."

"That was completely uncalled for," Echols says indignantly. "They'd been notified I was moving. I had adult supervision."

But, as he tells it, Driver found him inherently suspicious. At times, the officer would ask him who in his neighborhood was involved in satanic practices. "Once he showed me a page of Latin and asked me if I could read it."

Echols looks up, having said that, and pauses, as though that incident explained everything. "This whole thing is a chain," he finally says. "It all goes back to the religion."

The arrest resulted in Echols being returned to Charter Hospital, where, he says, "That second time, I think they really helped tremendously."

Echols credits Dr. Wrenda Gallion, a psychiatrist at Charter, with the improvement.

"I've been to counselors, psychologists, and therapists, and lots of times you feel worse after you've talked to them, because they want you to focus on your problems. But when I would talk to her, I would actually feel better.

"She was cheerful, and I guess it was contagious. I think it was more the joking around, the being able to be myself that helped more then talking about my family."

Another thing he believed helped was the staff's insistence that he interact with other people. "When I was out, I didn't associate with many people, and when you're alone like that you tend to focus on your problems so much. It seems like the entire universe consists of nothing but your worries.

"But at the hospital they forced me to be with other people, and that snatched me out of it. When I left, [two weeks later] I was a lot better, but I wasn't completely well."

Echols moved back to West Memphis, where he moved in with his girlfriend, Domini Teer. "We lived together," he says, "and she got pregnant."

He says he was "beyond happy" at the news. "I was enthusiastic, overwhelmed. It blew my mind."

About the time Teer was four months pregnant, Echols' parents moved back to Arkansas. He divided his time, living part of the week with them and part of the week with her. As required by the terms of his probation, he took the G.E.D. test passed it easily, and, in December 1992, received his high school diploma. He says he and Teer were planning to get married. But as to what he intended tin his life or how he intended to support his family, he admits, "I didn't have a clue."

That, more or less, was Echols' situation on May 5, 1993, the day the three boys were murdered. Within days he learned that he was considered a suspect, along with two other boys, Jason Baldwin, 17, and Jessie Misskelley, 16.

"The cops camped in our driveway," he says. " They had spotlights on the house. I could not sleep at night." In June Misskelley gave police a confession. He later recanted it, but the three teen-agers were charged.

Prosecutors tried Misskelley first. In a trial at Corning that ended Feb 4, a jury convinced him of two counts of second-degree murder and one count of first degree. He was sentenced to life without parole.

Echols' and Baldwin's trail began two weeks late in Jonesboro Prosecutors described Echols as the ringleader. They alluded to his interest in witchcraft and dabblings in the occult. They presented no evidence as to motive, nor any physical evidence linking the boys to the crime, but witnesses did testify that they had overheard Echols, some distance away at a ballgame, making statements implicating himself.

A jury found then guilty, and the verdicts are now on appeal. His lawyers, Ron Lax of Memphis and Val Price of Jonesboro, say they will show that there was evidence in the case pointing to at least one other suspect, which the police "either lost, mishandled, or ignored."

For his part, Echols says he has little confidence in the workings of the justice system and that he can easily imagine his life ending in an execution. "I get out some days and look forward to it," he says. "Once they do, they can't blame me with anything else. They can't mess with me anymore."

In prison, Echols has had plenty of time to reflect on what happened at his trial. "They wanted a monster," he says of the police, prosecutors, and jury. "It was such a horrible crime, they couldn't imagine who could do a thing like that. They looked at us and they thought, "These cold, heartless little creeps- they could have done it."

"They wanted a monster, and they don't want to hear now that an innocent person has been sentenced to death."

Echols, whose entire police record consists of the events recounted here, believes is was his strangeness and interest in a paganism, combined with Driver's fanaticism and a community's hysteria, that led to his conviction. He points, for example, to the prosecution self-described expert on Satanism, who testified that, because of the way the victims were tied, the nearness to water, and their nakedness, the killings could have been a satanic activity.

"Then he was asked, 'Could they have been satanic if they were not tied?', and jhe answered yes: "and, if it had not happened answered near water?', yes: 'And if their clothes had still been on- could the murders have been related to satanic activity?' And his answer again was yes.

"Anything could be satanic activity. They're chasing ghosts. They're looking for something that don't exist.

"Paganism doesn't even acknowledge the existence of Satan. Satan is a manmade thing.. They say. 'You shouldn't do this because you're going to go to hell.' What they should say is 'Don't do this because I don't like it.'"

Echols believes prejudice colored his investigation, arrest, trail and conviction and was evident even in the judge's chambers. "Even in the back room," he says, "the prosecutor and the judge were cracking jokes about us. One time they had this video of me at the rink. And the prosecutor was laughing and he said to the judge, 'Contrary to popular belief, Damien does show up in a picture.' "

Since his arrival at the Maximum Security Unit, Echols has remained on single-man status; that is, isolated from the rest of the death row population, purportedly for his own protection.

"I was told when I got here that everyone was going to hate me. Instead, I walked in and people started asking me for my autograph. Even some of the guards have asked for my autograph, It's insane."

He says he has no contact with Misskelley, but keeps in tough with Hason Baldwin, now 18, who is serving life sentence at Varner. Echols describes Baldwin as his only close friend. He says "He's doing okay, I guess."

As for Domini Teer, Echols said, "She still wants to get married now, but I'm not so sure. It will be a complete waste. I have no idea when I'll get out of here, or if I'll get out. I want her to get on with her life. I don't want Seth growing up without a father. I want him at least to have a father figure."

Meanwhile, Echols says he's writing a book he's titles "October Roses." It's about "a guy who dies and what he encounters after death."

And he reads. Among other things, he has in his cell" a ton of stuff bout Kurt Cobain," the young grunge musician who recently killed himself in Seattle.

But Echols does not get to read everything he wants. He complains that some books are denied him from the prison library.

And last week, he was told that he would not be allowed to receive two books he had mail ordered from a Memphis bookstore. Prison authorities described the book on their refusal form as "unauthorized material."

Echols asked that the books be turned over to this reporter. On, titled, "Helping Yourself with White Witchcraft," by Al G. Manning, is superficial to the point of silliness, with tips on warding off evil eyes, concocting love potions, and spells to attract money and prosperity.

The other is the "Complete Book of Witchcraft" by Raymond Buckland, as far more serious explanation of witchcraft's history, beliefs, and rituals.

Neither book contains any reference to Satanism, other that to dismiss is as a slander Christians have historically leveled against pagans. The only violence depicted in the books appears in Buckland's section on history, when he recounts the tortures and executions of witches (and of thousands of people who were merely accused of being witches), from 1484, when Pope Innocent VII issues his infamous bull against witches, to this country's colonial era and the infamous Salem witch trails.

"It's ignorance," Echols says of the prison's decision. "They let in other non-Christian books. They let the Koran in here. You see? Even here, it's all this religion thing."

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