

## **Elation Greets Recovery of 2 Boys After Abduction**

UNION, Mo., Jan. 13 — On Thursday evening, they were captives in the same tiny two-bedroom apartment in suburban St. Louis. Abducted four years apart, William Ownby and Shawn Hornbeck were freed on Friday, and they smiled sheepishly on Saturday as their families held back-to-back news conferences to discuss their boys' astonishing rescue.

Dressed in a checked shirt, blue jeans and a pair of oval glasses, William, 13, who is known as Ben, was instructed not to speak to reporters. Looking up occasionally, Ben clung close to his family as they rejoiced at the turn of events.

"We're just ecstatic," Ben's mother, Doris Ownby, said. "We don't want to let him go out of our sight."

Sheriff Gary Toelke of Franklin County said the kidnapping suspect, Michael Devlin, 41, had confessed, but added that he could not discuss details of the investigation.

Robert Parks, the Franklin County prosecuting attorney, has charged Mr. Devlin, a pizzeria manager, with one count of first-degree kidnapping. He was being held on \$1 million bond.

Emotions ran high in neighboring Washington County, where Shawn entered the balloon-festooned gymnasium at Richwoods Elementary, his old school. Wearing a blue hooded sweatshirt and sporting a shaggy head of hair and pierced lower lip, Shawn grasped his mother's hands. Also told not to speak to reporters, he laid his head on his mother's shoulder as she spoke.

"I still feel like I'm in a dream, only this time it's a good dream, not the nightmare I've had to live for the past four-and-a-half years," his mother, Pam Akers, told reporters.

Shawn's stepfather, Craig Akers, said he and his wife had been in disbelief when they were all reunited.

"There was that split second of shock," Mr. Akers said. "Once I saw the face, I said, 'Oh my God, that's my son.'"

Shawn, now 15, vanished on Oct. 6, 2002, when he was 11. His parents reported that he had last been seen wearing a Little League jersey as he rode a bicycle to a friend's house in Richwoods, Mo., a rural town about 65 miles southwest of St. Louis.

Ben, a Boy Scout and a straight-A student, disappeared on Monday afternoon after stepping off a school bus and running down a gravel road toward home in the rural town of Beaufort, Mo., about 60 miles west of St. Louis.

Ben's disappearance prompted an intense search of hilly Franklin County. Investigators said they had been following about 500 leads in the case, though they had focused on a tip from one of Ben's friends who had reported seeing a dilapidated white pickup with a camper shell speeding away from the place where Ben disappeared.

"Basically, that's all we had," Sheriff Toelke said.

Investigators got a break on Thursday when Kirkwood police officers, Gary Wagster and Chris Nelson, arrived at Mr. Devlin's apartment complex in suburban St. Louis. They were serving a warrant in an unrelated case but noticed a small white truck matching the description of the one in the Ownby investigation.

After questioning Mr. Devlin at the pizzeria, officers searched his ground-floor apartment on Friday.

Sheriff Toelke said Shawn identified himself to officers as having been missing for four-and-a-half-years when they entered the home.

Roland Corvington, special agent for the Federal Bureau of Investigation, told reporters that when officers entered the apartment, Ben asked: "Are you going to take me home?"

The boys had no visible injuries. Ben's parents said that on Friday night he was eager to play video games and go to bed.

Mr. Devlin, who managed an Imo's Pizza in Kirkwood, also worked part-time answering phones overnight at Bopp Chapel funeral home there.

"He was prompt, well-mannered and very efficient," Jim Moyers, a funeral director at Bopp Chapel, said in a statement.

Neighbors who lived across from Mr. Devlin's run-down red brick apartment were less generous. They described Mr. Devlin as an immense, bearded man with wire-rimmed glasses who kept to himself. They said that he did not appear to have been keeping secrets, but that he was combative and antisocial.

One neighbor, Mario Emanuel, 29, said that about three months ago Mr. Devlin called the police on a visitor who took his parking space.

Referring to Shawn, Mr. Emanuel, an installation technician for DirecTV, said, "When the police came, they talked to Devlin and the son — who turned out not to be the son — they talked to the police. If they would have investigated across the board, they would have had him."

Tom Ballman, a Kirkwood police officer, confirmed that Mr. Devlin had summoned the police to the apartment complex, a two-story working-class enclave in the otherwise well-to-do suburb.

Another neighbor said her husband had also had tense encounters with Mr. Devlin over the space.

"The parking spot thing was weird," the neighbor, Krista Jones, said. "He woke us up one night because he was honking in the parking lot at like 2 o'clock in the morning. Someone had parked in his space."

"My husband almost beat him up," she added.

Ms. Jones said that Mr. Devlin kept the blinds drawn, though she would occasionally see Shawn riding his bike in the evening and that the boy was occasionally visited by what appeared to be a friend and a girlfriend.

A check of Mr. Devlin's name with the Missouri Highway Patrol's sex-offender registry turned up nothing. And a search of Missouri court records revealed no criminal history.

Mr. Parks declined to divulge information about how the boys had spent their time in captivity, but added that more charges were likely to come. "It's my hope that he never sees the outside of jail in his natural life," Mr. Parks said.

Mr. Corvington of the F.B.I. said his agency was also looking into federal charges.

For the time being, though, the families said they were more interested in reconnecting with their rescued sons than worrying about Mr. Devlin's fate.

"We've got a lot of catching up to do," said a tearful Pam Akers, marveling at her teenage son's growth. "He's grown up on me, that's for sure."

Last modified: January 14, 2007 12:00AM