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FRONTLINE EXAMINES CONTROVERSIAL 'OUTING' OF SPOKANE MAYOR JIM WEST

FRONTLINE presents

A HIDDEN LIFE

Tuesday, November 14, 2006, at 9 P.M. ET on PBS

www.pbs.org/frontline/hiddenlife

In May 2005, readers of Spokane, Washington's local newspaper awoke to find a startling story: Jim West, Spokane's Republican mayor, had been leading a double life. In public, he was a conservative politician who had co-sponsored legislation forbidding gays from teaching in public schools. But in private, *The Spokesman-Review* reported, West spent hours trolling for young men on the Internet, sometimes using the trappings of his office as bait to lure them into more intimate relationships.

The story of a hypocritical, conservative gay politician briefly made national headlines, and ultimately destroyed West's political career. But in *A Hidden Life*, airing Tuesday, November 14, 2006, at 9 P.M. ET on PBS (check local listings), FRONTLINE producers Rachel Dretzin and Barak Goodman look beyond the headlines to find a story that is much less clear than it initially seemed. With access to all sides of the story, and a close reading of the mayor's Internet chat transcripts and other documents, *A Hidden Life* examines a man's struggle for sexual identity, a newspaper's controversial decision to conduct an online sting operation, and the growing tension between a politician's private life and the public's right to know in an age of online chat and instant messaging.

"We wanted to know, 'Do we have a mayor trolling on the Internet for underage boys?'" *Spokesman-Review* reporter Bill Morlin tells FRONTLINE, speaking of the paper's decision to hire a consultant to pose as a 17-year-old boy on a gay web site. The consultant then sought out the mayor to see how far West would go. "The intention wasn't to bait anyone," says Morlin. "The purpose of our investigation was a search for the truth. ... Our code of ethics prohibits me from pretending to be somebody I'm not. ... But we're not prevented from hiring consultants."

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The newspaper's investigation began as an attempt to reckon with a shameful secret from the past—a wave of child molestation that swept through Spokane in the 1970s, implicating men in some of the city's most trusted institutions: the Catholic Church, the Boy Scouts, and the sheriff's office. One of these men was a decorated Vietnam veteran, Boy Scout troop leader, and sheriff's deputy named David Hahn, who committed suicide in 1981 in the wake of allegations that he had sexually abused boys. Early in *The Spokesman-Review* investigation, Bill Morlin discovered that Hahn's close friend at the sheriff's department and the Boy Scouts was future Mayor Jim West. "Sources that I interviewed said that [Hahn and West] were peas in a pod," Morlin tells FRONTLINE. "They were inseparable."

In the course of trying to substantiate leads tying the mayor to the sexual abuse from the 1970s, Morlin received a tip from a 20-year-old college student who described meeting West in a gay Internet chat room. The source claimed to have gone on a date with the mayor that ended with a sexual encounter in a parking lot. From this point on, the paper narrowed its focus on the mayor's private life, past and present. "In my view, these stories were supportive of one another," says *Spokesman-Review* Editor Steven Smith. "If we have allegations that Jim West abused young boys twenty-five or thirty years ago, and we have an indication that he's pursuing young boys now, then each of those elements supports the other." Just before publication, the paper found one main source who claimed to have been molested by West as a young boy in the 1970s, when West was a Spokane sheriff's deputy. The paper decided to publish the allegation despite the fact that the source had never formally mentioned West in several previous statements about his abuse.

In the days and weeks after the scandal broke, West admitted visiting gay chat rooms, but he strongly denied the allegation that he had molested boys. "That's the preconceived notion *The Spokesman-Review* went into the story with," West tells FRONTLINE in his most in-depth television interview about the scandal. "They were convinced that I had abused young children years ago. In their mind, this was the, the main story. And in fact I didn't." To West, the newspaper's story might have begun as an attempt to reckon with Spokane's abuse history, but it had evolved into a more personal battle with *The Spokesman-Review* and its editor, Steven Smith. "The only way he can prove he's right is by running me out of office or killing me off," says West.

In December 2005—after 189 stories in *The Spokesman-Review* and the city's first ever recall election—Mayor West was voted out of office in a landslide. "The demise ... was absolutely Shakespearean," says David Ammons, who covered West's career for the Associated Press. "I would say he was the most important Republican in the state for a while. And now he's exiled in disgrace." West himself later tells FRONTLINE: "If what was printed in the newspaper and said on the radio [were] true, I'd abandon me. I'd

say, ‘How could I be near this person?’ But I knew that it wasn’t and the majority of my friends did too.”

In the end, *The Spokesman-Review*’s one-and-a-half-year investigation was unable to turn up substantial support for the charge that West had molested boys in the 1970s, or courted underage men online. “While we never confirm sexual activity with underage boys, what we find ourselves dealing with is abuse of office,” Steven Smith tells FRONTLINE, speaking of the paper’s evidence that West offered unpaid internships in the mayor’s office to men he met online. “The mayor appears to have been offering rewards and benefits and even jobs in return for sexual favors.”

On February 16, 2006, after completing an investigation, the FBI cleared Jim West of charges that he illegally misused his office. Five months later, on July 22, West died of cancer.

A Hidden Life is a FRONTLINE co-production with Ark Media, LLC. The film is produced by Rachel Dretzin and Muriel Soenens and is written by Barak Goodman. The directors are Rachel Dretzin and Barak Goodman. FRONTLINE is produced by WGBH Boston and is broadcast nationwide on PBS. Funding for FRONTLINE is provided through the support of PBS viewers and by The Park Foundation. FRONTLINE is closed-captioned for deaf and hard-of-hearing viewers. FRONTLINE is a registered trademark of WGBH Educational Foundation. The senior producer for FRONTLINE is Ken Dornstein. The executive producer for FRONTLINE is David Fanning.

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