

Doug Moe
THE TALK



Erlanger was a real treasure

I REMEMBER the first time I spoke with **Jeff Erlanger**, he had been doing a number of national media interviews and was a bit miffed because so many of them played up the fact that he was a quadriplegic.

Erlanger, who died here Sunday at 36, told me: "I never considered it part of the story."

It was, in any case, quite a story that Jeff was involved with in February 2000. ABC's "Good Morning America" wanted it. So did a radio station in Iceland. So did I.

This was before Jeff and I became friendly and he asked me to speak to a class he was teaching, before I knew about his close relationship with TV's **Fred Rogers**, or the many civic causes Jeff devoted himself to in Madison. I just knew a good story when I heard one, and Erlanger had a stunner.

He was good enough to share it in an extended telephone conversation that began with Jeff explaining that he had been born in Berkeley, Calif., and moved to Madison when he was a year old. His parents, **Howard** and **Pam Erlanger**, had taken teaching positions at the University of Wisconsin.

A tumor on his spinal cord, discovered when Jeff was 7 months old, had left him without the use of his legs and partial use of only one arm. In a sense, he hardly seemed to notice. He was too busy doing things. I never mentioned it to Jeff, but he reminded

me of something **Bill Veeck**, the colorful baseball club owner, often said about his own disability: "I'm not handicapped, I'm crippled." Handicapped meant there might be something he could not do.

On the night of Feb. 17, 2000, Jeff Erlanger was in his apartment at the Towers on Frances Street. He was surfing the Internet on his computer, something he did often. Erlanger had been on the ESPN site reading **Peter Gammons** on baseball — one of Jeff's passions — and then he went into a chat room on America Online. He found a woman, **Sarah**, he thought he might like to talk to, so he typed in a note: "Hello."

Sarah answered. "We just started small-talking," Erlanger told me later. "She said she was from Boston."

Erlanger typed in a question: "What do you do for a living?"

Sarah typed: "I'm a dentist. But can I tell you about myself?"

Before Erlanger could respond, Sarah elaborated: "I'm a manic-depressive. I've attempted suicide. I've been hospitalized for it."

Erlanger, unsure how to respond, typed: "OK."

Sarah typed back: "At this moment I have blood running down my arms."



Erlanger

Erlanger had no way of knowing if she was telling the truth. He felt he needed to proceed as if it were true.

"Are you all right?" Erlanger wrote.

Sarah answered: "No."

Erlanger: "Do you want help?"

Sarah: "No."

That wasn't the answer Erlanger was hoping to see. He thought quickly. Because the computer was tying up his only phone line, Erlanger, in his wheelchair, went out to the Towers lobby and phoned 911. He asked the operator to put him through to 911 emergency in Boston. The operator was unable to do that, and also unable to provide him a number for the Boston police, which got Jeff a little hot.

"Stay calm," the operator said.

"I am calm," Erlanger said. "I just need the number for the Boston police."

He finally got it by calling directory assistance, but when he reached the authorities in Boston, they said they couldn't do much without a last name.

Back at his computer, Erlanger typed: "Are you still there?"

Sarah answered: "Yes, I am."

"Will you give me your last name?"

"I already told you I won't do that."

Erlanger had another idea. He sought assistance from America Online, typing in a message to their "help" site. Someone typed back: "You have to call the police."

Erlanger went back to Sarah, just to stay in contact: "What do you do for fun?"

Sarah typed: "I like to work out." But then she broke the connection.

Erlanger went back to the phone and again

called Boston police, this time suggesting that they contact America Online. That worked. With AOL's help, the police were able to locate Sarah in Boston. They found her with fresh cuts on her wrists. A Boston Globe reporter later told Jeff the injuries were not life-threatening, but Sarah had been hospitalized for observation.

Erlanger told me: "I'm glad I was able to help." He saw it as evidence of the value of the Internet, which Jeff loved.

We stayed in touch after that. I wrote about his run for the Madison City Council, and helped out at a summer school class for seniors Jeff taught on campus.

When Fred Rogers, of "Mister Rogers" TV fame, died in 2003, I went over to Jeff's parents' house to look at some photos that had been taken of Jeff and Rogers in 1975, when the star was making an appearance in Milwaukee. The two hit it off so well that Rogers later asked Erlanger to appear on the show. A producer would tell a Pittsburgh newspaper that Jeff's appearance was the "most treasured" memory in the history of "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood." Erlanger spoke at Rogers' memorial service in Pittsburgh.

I'm remembering now our first conversation, and how Jeff responded to those news stories of his Internet adventure that focused on his being a quadriplegic. It was understated, and pure Jeff.

"I think I get around very well," he said.

Heard something Moe should know? Call 252-6446, write PO Box 8060, Madison, WI 53708, or e-mail dmoe@madison.com.