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Hollywood's Father Troubled By 'Alpha Dog'

By Dawn Hobbs, News-Press Staff Writer

The father of Jesse James Hollywood told the News-Press on Saturday that he hopes potential jurors in Santa Barbara can put aside the negative portrayal of his son in the major motion picture "Alpha Dog" -- released nationally Friday -- and give him a fair shake when his high-profile murder trial gets under way.

Jack Hollywood was dismayed to read in Saturday's paper that some moviegoers, after seeing the film, decided his son was guilty and deserved the death penalty. "Alpha Dog" opened locally at the Metro 4 Theatre on State Street.

"I just hope they can look at the facts," Jack Hollywood said in his first interview since the film's release nationwide. "It's been hard because anyone who has had anything good to say about Jesse hasn't had an opportunity to speak. I just look forward to people telling what really happened -- and I hope the jurors will keep an open mind."

The film was produced with material from files supplied by the Santa Barbara County District Attorney's Office concerning the brutal slaying of 15-year-old Nicholas Markowitz near a hiking trail off East Camino Cielo in August 2000.

Authorities allege that Nicholas was abducted over his half-brother's \$1,200 marijuana debt to Jesse James Hollywood and then killed to cover up evidence of the kidnapping. Mr. Hollywood is accused of orchestrating the crimes.

"Jesse has never been arrested before," his father said. "There were a bunch of idiots involved and this thing got out of control. It's very upsetting. . . . I don't think there's any excuse for what happened to Nick Markowitz -- and God bless his parents, they've been through a lot -- it was a horrible thing."

Mr. Hollywood said his son ran after learning he could be facing the death penalty. At 20, his son became the youngest man on the FBI's Most Wanted list.

In March 2005, Jesse James Hollywood was captured in Saquarema, Brazil, and brought to Santa Barbara, where he has since remained in custody without bail.

His four co-defendants were convicted between 2001 and 2003. The death penalty trial of Mr. Hollywood, now 26, is expected to begin sometime this year.

Jack Hollywood, whose character is played by Bruce Willis, worked as a paid consultant on the movie set. But he said filmmaker Nick Cassavetes made clear that the script was a done deal. Mr. Hollywood said there were inaccuracies in the film about how he treated his family, but he was more concerned about how his son was portrayed.

"I tried telling the kid playing my son (Emile Hirsch) that my kid's not a monster and I tried telling Nick (Cassavetes) that maybe there's a couple of points I can enlighten him on," Mr. Hollywood said. "But they couldn't stray from the script. There was big money put up for this story. They had a horrible bad guy and disillusioned kids -- and they had to stick to it.

"I don't personally hold anything against the filmmakers -- they were pumped full of every type of coerced testimony and everything else for two years before I even got near anything." Mr. Hollywood is, however, critical of the Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Department and District Attorney's Office for how they handled the case, and questions the tactics authorities used to interrogate witnesses, some of whom were promised immunity for their testimony.

"My credibility may not be so good because from day one, they've had me pegged as the big Mafia kingpin," said Mr. Hollywood, who recently served time on a marijuana conviction. "But I'm a father who has a son and knows that things didn't happen the way they say it did."

Authorities from the Sheriff's Department and District Attorney's Office have repeatedly declined to comment on the case.

Mr. Hollywood said that his son does not at all resemble his character in the movie, who is depicted as a drug-dealing thug who masterminds the kidnapping and murder of the teen. In fact, he said, his son is actually a nice person.

"He was just a smart and funny kid," Mr. Hollywood said. "He was an athlete in high school. He was a good friend to his friends.

". . . I'm not saying my son was an angel. He was evidently involved in some illegal things as far as marijuana sales go, but all I'm saying is he's not what they're making him out to be in the movie and he never had any history of being that type of person."

The release of the film Friday followed numerous attempts by defense lawyer James Blatt to delay it being shown on the big screen until after his client's death penalty trial is over.

To release it beforehand, he has adamantly insisted, will prejudice jurors against Jesse James Hollywood and jeopardize his rights to a fair trial.

Nonetheless, the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeal upheld the entertainment industry's right to publish without prior restraint and indicated that the lawyers should be able to find 12 unbiased jurors. As a result, "Alpha Dog" has become the first film in the U.S. based on a criminal case to be released before the trial has even begun.

Now, Jesse James Hollywood himself apparently is wondering if he can get a fair trial anywhere. After reading the newspaper Saturday, he told his father during a visit at the Santa Barbara County Jail that it appears his chances are slim.

"He said he doesn't even care now and that we should just give him the death penalty since that's what people want anyway," said Jack Hollywood, who was in town from Flagstaff, Ariz., where he was paroled after serving 18 months for smuggling marijuana

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He's now trying to get approval to relocate so that he can see his son more often.

"He seems to be doing OK, but stuff like this rattles him," Mr. Hollywood said.

Defense lawyer Mr. Blatt had harsh criticism for the District Attorney's Office, whose prosecutor was recused for cooperating with the filmmakers. That matter is now pending before the state Supreme Court.

"Everyone in that movie has a sympathetic factor except for Jesse James Hollywood," Mr. Blatt told the News-Press on Saturday. "Everyone is torn and troubled. But Jesse is devoid of human feeling -- they portray him as narcissistic and uncaring and that's exactly how the District Attorney's Office wants him portrayed.

"This has really demeaned the criminal justice system and it didn't have to happen," he said. But the defense lawyer is still optimistic.

". . . Americans have an innate sense of fairness and I think the majority of Americans are likely opposed to this film coming out before the trial and want an individual to have a fair trial."