

# The years for Jimmy James Caballero numbered a bittersweet 16

Just 16 years ago, Jimmy James Caballero, the quiet one, came home from the hospital to La Reforma, a crowded low-income project in sight of the high-rises downtown.

The boy's family, with myriad offshoots, had endured for generations in Southern Arizona.

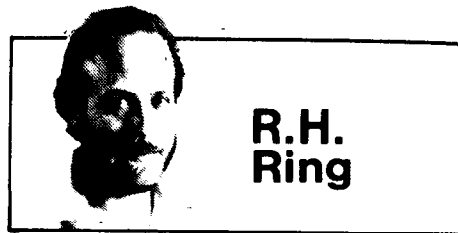
His father's father was a miner.

His father, Manuel, never got to the sixth grade. He picked cotton, carried bricks, shoveled earth to support his wife and children.

Two sisters and a brother had arrived before Jimmy James. The Caballeros needed more room, and when Manuel had saved the down payment, they moved to a cardboard shack across the river.

Manuel's prosperity came from a good job, one he still works today after 14 years, driving a garbage truck for the city.

Jimmy James, big and responsible for his age, pitched in to make the shack livable. He cleaned the yard, carried the bricks his uncle laid around the old walls. Doors and



## Commentary

windows were installed where none had been. New wiring replaced light cords drooping from the ceiling.

Near the front door, a shrine to the Virgin of Guadalupe was erected with cemented stones sheltering her figurine. Over the madonna, a symbol of perseverance, a light bulb was wired. The family "made a promise" and turned it on.

In Jimmy James' world, childhood passed quickly. His sisters, his brother dropped out of high school to marry and have kids of their own.

Young Jimmy James was tall and strong. He played basketball in junior high, started at center and won some ribbons. He lifted weights and boxed. He drank a little beer, smoked a little pot. But he didn't run with a gang, like some did. He was a boy wearing a man's pants.

Nobody thought it premature when, at 14, Jimmy James quit school and hired on at the casket factory that employed his mother, brother, two aunts, an uncle.

His mother, Marylou, worked up to \$4.30 an hour after three years there. She lined the boxes with paper, then placed a pillow in each one. She told the bosses Jimmy James was 17 to get him hired.

Jimmy James was paid \$3.80 an hour to saw particle board for the coffins and install the hinges.

Everybody liked Jimmy James. He was quiet and kept to himself. He opened up only to Cecilia. Her sister was living with his brother, so they were already connected when they began to date.

It wasn't long before Cecilia was preg-

nant. This, too, was not unusual. Her sister, 18, already had two babies. Her brother, 20, had one.

Cecilia and Jimmy James were both 15 when they rented a house. They were happy together. "Babe," they called each other. They had a color TV and a Chevy bought by Jimmy James' parents. They liked to cruise and would stop at Whataburger for Jimmy James' regular: a double cheeseburger, two orders of fries and a large Coke.

Rats and armies of roaches shared their rundown house; Jimmy James and Cecilia moved to a tiny apartment for the baby's sake. Jimmy James got off work to watch his son being born and brought Jimmy James Jr. home to the TV and the orange shag rug.

The growing family required more than the take-home pay for making caskets. With the help of Cecilia's cousin, Jimmy James found a job carrying bricks, just as he had as a child, just as his father had. The \$5 an hour would finance a second baby he and Cecilia wanted so much.

At the brink of opportunity, Jimmy James went out for beers after his first day on the job. It was two weeks ago. The celebrators returned to the job site to show what Jimmy James had done. He was proud to carry bricks for men who knew how to lay them down.

On the way home, the cousin, whose face bears the scars from another wreck, steered off the road. The car rolled. Jimmy James Caballero, riding in back, was killed.

Jimmy James was buried in a casket made by the company where he worked. His family bought a fine, bronze model. His father and brother were drunk for a week.

The project where Jimmy James played as a boy is closed now. There aren't many photos to illustrate his life. The best one, in his father's wallet, was taken at K mart. Others, kept by Cecilia, were stolen. His basketball ribbons were lost. The chrome wheels to cherry out his Chevy are gone, too, stolen.

But a yellow light still shines over the Virgin at his parents' home.