

# People

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## **Catching Heat: Arrested for a \$ 40 robbery, Sopranos star Robert Iler claims innocence and learns the downside of fame**

The first thing he said to me," says Helen Iler of her 16-year-old son, Robert, "the first words were, 'Mommy, you know I didn't take any money and I didn't rob anybody.'" His mother didn't need convincing. "He is a good-hearted person," she says. "I can't picture him doing anything like this."

Fans of HBO's *The Sopranos* may have less difficulty imagining Iler, who plays mob boss Tony Soprano's errant son Anthony Jr., participating in the robbery of two teenage boys on a Manhattan street corner, as police charge. After all, didn't A.J. last season help vandalize his school's swimming pool and steal a geometry exam? But those close to Iler, who began doing commercials at age 6 and made his debut as A.J. at age 13, insist that the actor, a soon-to-be 11th-grader who's tutored privately (and "gets really good grades," says his manager, Jeff Mitchell), is nothing like A.J. The arrest, they maintain, was a bum rap. Iler, says his attorney Steven Mintz, "was in the wrong place at the wrong time."

According to the Manhattan district attorney's official complaint, the incident began shortly before midnight on July 3. The actor was on East 75th Street in Manhattan, not too far from home, with three other friends--Michael Cournede, 19, Alban Selimaj, 16, and a 15-year-old minor who has not been named. The complaint alleges that the four approached and surrounded two teenagers--both Brazilian, one a tourist--then demanded their money while inquiring pointedly, "Do you wanna die?" After scoring a total of \$ 40 off the two, they walked away.

The cops who rounded up Iler and his friends at a nearby park less than half an hour later charged him with two counts of second-degree robbery and one of possession of marijuana. Iler, who denies involvement in the robbery, was being photographed and fingerprinted at the 19th precinct station when an officer asked, "Why are you doing this? You've got an acting career. You're doing good." Iler's answer, according to a police source: "Don't concern yourself with my acting career." Then he reportedly added, "Hey, I'm a millionaire."

Attorney Mintz says he would be surprised if his client said these things. In fact, the incident has left Iler "very embarrassed and upset," says his father, Edward McGreevy, 34, an engineer who never married Iler's mother and lives with his wife and four other children in a New York City suburb. Iler, who spends many weekends with McGreevy, shares an apartment with Helen, 35, a Metropolitan Transportation Authority employee,

in a rent-subsidized high-rise on Manhattan's East Side. His Sopranos earnings are socked away in a trust fund that he can't touch for the next two years. Even so, it's unlikely he needed \$ 40, since he receives an allowance from both parents and "gets money all the time," says Helen.

Soon after leaving the precinct station and posting \$ 2,500 bail on July 4, Iler veered into a media storm. He was mobbed by camera crews as he left his arraignment at Manhattan criminal court, and no less than New York City mayor Rudolph Giuliani--an avowed Sopranos fan--was moved to comment, "To have something like this happen to a young person is a shame." (He added he also felt bad "for the people who were apparently victimized, which is also pretty rotten.") Robert, says his mom, "didn't realize his life was this important to the public."

Now, says Mintz, "he'd like this to go away. But he understands there's a process." A grand jury is expected to decide whether or not to indict by July 18. Cournede, who claims he is innocent, faces the additional charge of criminal possession of a weapon (a box cutter). According to his attorney Stanley Cohen, Alban Selimaj, who also maintains his innocence, says that Iler was not involved but was walking ahead of them, talking to a girl. (As to the first-time marijuana violation, that at most could earn Iler a \$ 100 fine.) "We're more confident than ever that Robert will be completely exonerated," Michael Bachner, another Iler attorney, told reporters July 9.

Whatever the outcome, he's wanted back at The Sopranos for the fourth season, which starts shooting this fall. "I'd be proud to have him as my son," executive producer David Chase said.

As is, naturally, his mother. "I always taught him to be a normal kid," says Helen, and neighbors in their building believe she has succeeded. "He never has an attitude," says Richard Mendez, 36, who says Iler sometimes plays with his mentally disabled 8-year-old son. And Iler has been known to hold the door for Christine O'Sullivan, 51, who observes with a laugh, "I'm sure his mother wants to kick his butt."

Just the opposite, it seems. "To see Robert all over the media," Helen Iler says with a sigh. "I feel I'm going to have to shelter him more."