

Angels On-line

BY HAL KARP

For victims of Internet predators, these volunteers are an answered prayer

Special CyberAngels Forum: If you have a question about cyberspace that a CyberAngel can answer, [post it here](#).

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IN 1996 Kelley Beatty's best friend moved some 3,700 kilometres from their hometown of Quinte, Ont., and to keep in touch, both women got hooked up to the Internet. At designated times each day, they'd meet on-line and participate in chat rooms, where people connect for live conversations. "It was perfect," remembers Beatty, a 39-year-old nurse. "For pennies, we'd chat for hours."

One night while waiting for her friend on-line, Beatty received an instant message from someone named Greg. "What do you do?" he asked. "Where do you live?" Beatty answered in general terms, and when her friend appeared, bid Greg good-bye. The exchange lasted maybe ten minutes.

From that moment, however, whenever Beatty went on-line, Greg would message her within seconds. *How does he know exactly when I log on?* Beatty wondered.

At first Greg simply asked to chat, and Beatty was polite. But when she wouldn't go further and spend more time on-line with him, he bombarded her with messages. "Are you talking to another man?" he'd ask, even though Beatty had often explained she was married.

Beatty changed her screen name, but Greg found her every time. And his messages were becoming demanding. "Where have you been!" he once typed. "Why weren't you on-line at 12!" Her connection with her closest friend was being poisoned.

Angrily she typed one night, "LEAVE ME ALONE!" Greg wrote back, "I know where you live." The mother of two sat stunned as her full name, address and phone number appeared on-screen.

Hands trembling, Beatty began to cry. She called the police. They just told her to turn off her computer. *They just don't get it*, she thought.

She phoned her friend to explain she couldn't chat anymore. Her friend suggested searching for help on-line. Beatty typed "stalking" into an Internet search engine. A plethora of web sites came back, but the one that caught her eye would change her life forever.

The Wild West On-line. Cyberangels comprises more than 6,000 volunteers -- homemakers, accountants, artists, law-enforcement officers -- who have joined forces and patrol the Web around the clock. Battling child pornography and protecting people from stalkers, pedophiles and other criminals on-line, Cyberangels, founded in the United States in 1995, is the world's oldest and largest on-line-safety organization. Working from home computers in more than 70 countries, the nonprofit organization could only have been forged on the borderless Internet.

Beatty plugged into a Cyberangels chat room where members explained how Greg had tracked her: She had unknowingly released personal information by completing a simple profile on her chat program. Anyone could view it.

Beatty revised her profile to conceal her identity, and Greg vanished. Enormously grateful, she became the first Canadian Cyberangel. Today, as deputy executive director, she's second in charge. She also maintains the database for Canada's 150 members.

For Beatty the most daunting challenge is that the World Wide Web is much like the Wild West: a new frontier with few laws and fewer cops. "That's where we come in," she says.

Cyberangels has built alliances with local and provincial police forces, the RCMP and other law-enforcement agencies. Last fall it helped Japanese authorities locate illegal sites. The outcome: the first-ever arrests in Japan of alleged Internet child pornographers.

But Beatty's greatest concern is the crime she fell prey to: cyberstalking. "It's the new Internet threat," Beatty says. "And laws to nab these stalkers are ineffective and riddled with loopholes."

The Canadian Centre for Missing Children defines cyberstalking as unwanted, threatening or offensive e-mail, or other personal communication over the computer that persists despite requests that it stop. The communication need not be directed to the victim; abusive messages in public Web places count. Cyberangels estimates as many as 80,000 Canadians are cyberstalked annually.

Who are these stalkers? Commonly, kids who think harassment is a joke, or strangers who develop romantic on-line obsessions, or former lovers who want revenge. They may also be people who inexplicably set out to harm others. "Many cases wouldn't occur without the Internet," says Beatty. "It creates a sense of security. They think they're untouchable." Often they are.

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Most begin harassing victims through e-mail or instant messages. When they're rebuffed, stalkers can easily discover when their quarry enters a chat room and, using

innocuous names, observe them, gathering personal information from conversations, on-line directories and sites visited.

Often, cyberstalkers assume their victim's identity to harass others or post sex ads with a victim's name, address and phone number. In more severe incidents they e-mail the victim hidden programs allowing them access to his or her computer. The stalker remotely operates the computer, accessing letters and financial data.

In worst-case scenarios, on-line stalking becomes off-line terror. Documented cases include vandalism, assault, even murder. In the United States last year, a cyberstalker followed through on threats he posted on his web sites to kill a 20-year-old dental assistant, then killed himself.

The most helpless moment for victims can be when they realize law enforcement often offers little help. Because of the Internet's rapid growth -- more than 13 million users in Canada alone -- law-enforcement agencies are still catching up with this new breed of criminal. While Canada has a federal law against harassment and stalking, nothing specific exists against cyberstalking, and no Internet case has yet been tried.

Even the issue of borders remains unaddressed. "If a person in the States stalks someone in Canada, jurisdiction becomes a major problem," Beatty explains. "With no American federal cyberstalking law, it's unlikely anything will be done." It happens often.

In March 1999 Karen Boothe* of Alberta was shocked to learn her 14-year-old daughter, Stacy, and a friend had an on-line relationship with a 37-year-old man in Seattle. When he wrote perversely sexual letters, Stacy attempted to cease contact. He wasn't happy. He wrote a letter to Stacy detailing how and why she should kill herself. In tears, the ninth grader showed it to her mother. It made her vomit.

Boothe contacted the FBI. They informed Seattle police. A detective contacted the family, but nothing was ever done. The girls finally ignored the persistent e-mails until they ceased. "But he's out there and knows where we live," says Boothe, now working on becoming a Cyberangel.

The dearth of cyberstalking laws often leaves Cyberangels resolving cases alone. Luckily, notes Beatty, a stalker usually disappears once stripped of anonymity.

On Patrol. One warm spring day this year, Connie Stewart,* 50, put her Cyberangel wings to the test. While chatting on-line, she was contacted by a 20-year-old friend being stalked. "Help," she pleaded.

The victim, in Australia, was chatting with a man when a message appeared: "Put down that chocolate and pay attention to me!" And she *had* been eating chocolate. Minutes later her printer spit out threats. He had control of her computer, printer and webcam, a small camera atop her monitor. She was terrified.

Stewart interviewed the victim and learned the stalker's on-line habits. Within minutes she found him in his favourite chat room.

A few keystrokes later Stewart located an exclusive ten-digit code disclosing his Internet service provider (ISP). Then, using a special tracing program, Stewart discovered the ISP was in her own province, British Columbia. Finally, accessing his profile through another chat program, she got his name.

"Gotcha!" Stewart cheered. She promptly informed the ISP, then sent time-stamped chat logs revealing his abuses. Stewart forwarded her findings to the victim with

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instructions on what to tell police if the harassment continued. But it never went that far. The tables turned, this stalker, like so many others, retreated.

Stewart is one of over 200 Cyberangels on-line at any moment. Around the globe, they snare about 75 cyberstalkers every week, helping thousands of people.

"We empower victims," Stewart explains. "The notion that someone is after you and knows where you live robs you of your power. We give it back." Stewart should know; she was a victim of cyberstalking two years ago. The same goes for many of Cyberangels' members.

Worth All the Effort. Cyberangel Lorraine Christian of Langley, B.C., was stalked on-line in 1996. The 29-year-old student was shocked when a man from a chat room asked how the weather was at her address. He included her phone number. In her own dining room, Christian suddenly felt invaded and unsafe.

In February 1999 Christian saw Kelley Beatty interviewed on CTV's "The Dini Petty Show." Hearing Beatty explain Cyberangels, the divorced mother of three instantly recalled her feelings of helplessness and was moved by the organization's vigilance against child pornography. Realizing she could make a difference, she joined.

Like all potential angels who wish to work with victims, Christian passed a criminal background check and took on-line classes on managing chat rooms, spotting predators and unmasking them through computer tracing.

Christian is now Cyberangels' chief volunteer operations officer. She reviews all new membership applications, verifies the information, maintains a database and mails welcome letters. In the past year she has worked three to six hours a day, seven days a week, processing over 5,000 applications. She is frequently at her computer until the wee hours.

"It's worth all the effort," she says. "To be part of an organization that's doing something significant has given me a new sense of purpose."

Kelley Beatty, who still works as a nurse, echoes these sentiments. "Cyberangels has given my life meaning beyond what I can comprehend."