

The Angels of Cyber Space

The Cyber Angels Cyber Crime Unit is watching over victims of Internet crimes

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"I need help. I don't know where to turn to. I met a man and engaged in activities online that I should not have. He has inappropriate photos of me and saved video from a Web camera without my consent. Now he is threatening to send them to my fiancé unless I do what he says. Please help me."

"My daughter is still a minor and I have just found out that a 48-year-old man has been sending naked pictures over the Webcam. I'm very concerned he is brainwashing her. What action can I take for the safety of my daughter?"

"For the past two months an Internet stalker has been harassing me. This week it turned scary as he threatened to murder my husband. I don't know if he is serious, but he is still following me and throwing horrible slurs at me in public places. I don't know where to go for help."

These are examples of actual e-mails that the CyberAngels Cyber Crime Unit (CCU) receives every day. The CyberAngels unit was formed in 1995 by Curtis Sliwa, in response to the emerging problems occurring on the Internet. The Internet has undoubtedly been a boon for millions of users. But it has also proved to be an ideal medium for many "real life" crimes.

"Real life" is an Internet chat term used to distinguish between online and offline activities. The term is a misnomer though. It implies that what occurs online is somehow less "real" than what occurs offline. The 48-year-old man in the case above may be on the other side of the planet. But when he watches your daughter through the Webcam, it is like being outside her window. Ask the stalking victim if her situation feels less real because it occurs in the land of 1s and 0s. There may be a dichotomy between online and offline activity, but it is all very "real."

Constable Peter Sweetlove, a New Norfolk police officer in Australia, is all too familiar with these cases, having worked with CyberAngels in the past.

"Borders don't matter and the Internet means people can take a dislike to anyone anywhere across the world," he says. "The Internet is a very dangerous tool and I wish more people understood just how dangerous it is."

When victims encounter problems, they are often confused about where to go for help. "Should I call the store where I bought my computer? Should I call my Internet Service Provider (ISP)? Or maybe there is some type of International Cyber Police Force that handles these things? Maybe I should drive down to my local police station? Wait, this guy is in another country. Do I call their police for help?"

The CyberAngels CCU Team is devoted to assisting victims with these types of problems. But let's be absolutely clear about what they do and don't do. The CCU is a group of vigilantes or law enforcement wannabes. It is not going to track down, hack or engage any of the alleged perpetrators. Nor does it conduct stings in chatrooms.

The fundamental role of the CCU team is to help victims help themselves. If a crime has been committed, the CCU team is going to direct that victim to the appropriate law enforcement authority. And if necessary, it may liaise with an authority on the victim's behalf. On occasion the CCU has liaised with Interpol, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children and the British Internet Watch Foundation, as well as local police departments.

Additionally, the CCU team has established protocols for the victim to regain control of their lives. Different problems have unique solutions and it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss them all. However, many Internet problems have a common denominator - the person's online identity became linked to their offline identity.

A child predator coerces a phone number from his victim so they can talk. A link was just made between online and offline worlds, and that phone number may have unraveled the address as well. Perhaps a stalker pieces together the identity of his victim from a history of posts in a support group. Another connection is made between online and offline. A thief steals an identity from a resume posted on a home page. Why not just post a credit card number there, too? Oh yeah, maybe he has enough private information now to get his own card in a victim's name.

Very different situations, but the same root problem. So when a CCU agent counsels his victim seeking assistance, it is not uncommon to see advice like:

- Be extremely cautious about giving any personal information like names, addresses, phone numbers, schools or pictures.
- Be careful what is in your profile on sites like myspace.com. Ask yourself - what could a criminal learn about me from this site?
- Avoid IDs or user names that give clues to who you are, for example, caryhscheerleader.
- Choose passwords that are not easily guessed, preferably with a number and special character in it.

Chatting on the Internet is a double-edged sword. It brings together people from all over the world with common interests, but it also draws in the dregs of society. Most victims do not realize until it is too late that they should have been more guarded with their personal information.

CyberAngels also has HomeFront and Software teams that provide a valuable preventive service. One of the many roles for HomeFront is to provide tips to parents to keep children safe on the Internet. The Software team studies the various products on the market to keep computers secure from threats on the Internet. The idea is that the group can help people before they become victims.

Another important team within the CyberAngels organization is the newly created Police Liaison Unit (PLU). The goal of the PLU is to bridge the connections between law enforcement agencies and the CCU. The PLU realizes many police departments are busy enough with offline cases, let alone the Internet complaints. (Or maybe the case is not within the department's specific jurisdiction.) The PLU and CCU want to help these departments. The message is simple:

- The CCU are volunteers and do not charge anyone for their time. They are a free tool at the disposal of the police,
- The CyberAngels are not looking to exploit the situation by pushing some ancillary agenda,
- The group's only reward is the joy and satisfaction of helping people in need.

"CyberAngels hopes to show law enforcement agencies that our two organizations working together is a 'win-win' for everyone involved," says CCU Director Jay Fisher.

"Busy and overworked police can refer victims to a reputable agency that can provide a quick response with a potential solution. Police will also be assured that, if a case comes back to them, it is because all reasonable methods have been taken to address the problem and the problem is sufficiently serious to need their attention."

The CyberAngels has volunteers from all walks of life - police officers, a judge, assistant attorney general, lawyers, IT specialists, educators and even the oft-underappreciated homemakers. And they come from all over the world as well - the United States, Canada, Britain, France, Australia, Brazil, Pakistan and India. The common denominator is that they want to make the Internet a safer environment, as well as protect the innocent.

In fact, in 1998 these efforts were recognized by President Bill Clinton at the White House with the President's Service Award.

If your police department is interested in working with the CyberAngels CCU or you would like more information, please e-mail Scott Scheffler (cybercrime@cyberangels.org)