

MIKE WENDLAND: Vigilantes on Internet create trouble for cops

Their well-intentioned search for pedophiles sometimes ruins lives

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Call them Internet vigilantes, prowling the Web in search of adults trying to pick up underage teens.

"They got me," said Brian Graves, red-eyed from lack of sleep, his hands shaking from too much coffee. "What I did wasn't right. But what they did is even worse."

Early one morning last week, Graves -- a 42-year-old math teacher at Warren Mott High School -- started a chat over the Internet with someone who said she was a 13-year-old from Ferndale. Before long, the conversation turned to sex. Later, the teen asked for his phone number. He gave it to her.

But Graves wasn't really chatting with a teenage girl. On the other end of the line was a 28-year-old Wisconsin man who's part of a Web site called Perverted-Justice.com. Its mission, the site says, is to target "wannabe pedophiles."

Within 48 hours, a transcript of the chat -- along with Graves' picture, home and e-mail addresses and telephone number -- was posted on the site and e-mailed to police, school officials and the news media.

That made him one of more than 300 people whose online chats have been made public by the site. That number includes men from New Baltimore, Sterling Heights, Westland and Lansing.

Police say such vigilante methods don't help them bring pedophiles to justice. Graves says the tactics brought him to the verge of suicide.

But the Wisconsin man who portrayed himself as Keely from Ferndale says his goal is public humiliation of people who engage in sexual conversation with young people online -- and perhaps are searching for more.

"He brought this on himself," said the man, who uses the screen name Beef The Troll online and would not give his real name. "Maybe the next guy will learn from his example."

Just playing along

Graves says he is not a pedophile but a happily married Grosse Pointe father of three who started dabbling in cybersex this summer -- but never, he says, with children. He says he knew the person wasn't a 13-year-old, and he was just playing along at the computer late at night, after his family had gone to bed -- and he thought the person in the chat room was role-playing, too.

"Nobody is who they claim they are in these chats, though obviously it went way too far in my case," he said. "It was a stupid error in judgment . . . but that's all it was. I wish for

all the world I hadn't gone online."

His attorney, Elias Muawad of St. Clair Shores, says Graves' conversation was "all make believe" that "happens online a million times a day in these chat rooms."

A spokesman for the Macomb County Sheriff's Department said it was alerted to the incident but planned no action because no crime was committed.

"There was no physical contact, and no actual meeting with a 13-year-old girl occurred," said Detective Greg Finch of the department's Macomb Area Computer Enforcement Unit, which investigates cyber crimes.

Privacy issues

Muawad says he plans on suing the site for invading Graves' privacy and defaming him.

"They've appointed themselves prosecutor, judge, jury and executioner without any semblance of legal checks and balances," Muawad said. "They have to be stopped."

Police and more established Internet safety groups agree, citing the potential to do irreparable damage to someone's reputation by what amounts to hearsay.

That potential was illustrated during the site's search for Graves over the weekend. When he posted the transcript, Beef also posted a picture Graves sent him during the chat and asked readers to identify him. Initially, readers fingered another teacher at a different Macomb County school. That erroneous identification was still accessible on the site's bulletin board Wednesday.

Sunday afternoon, a participant on the bulletin board said he found a picture of Graves on Warren Mott's school Web site wearing the same shirt as in the picture posted by Beef.

"Catching real pedophiles is a job for the professionals," said Katya Gifford, program manager for the Internet child protection group CyberAngels

(<http://www.cyberangels.com/>).

"These people are amateurs. We believe pedophiles should be arrested and put away, but that needs to be done by real police officers. All this vigilante site does is tip off the real pedophiles who are not caught at all but just learn how to be more careful."

Helping or hurting?

Gifford says the potential for abuse through such vigilante tactics is great. "I can see where someone could pose as someone else or someone could just be fooling around, and then this site could then totally trash an innocent person's reputation," she said. "That worries me."

Yet the administrator of Perverted-Justice.com, who identifies himself only as Xavier Von Erck, vows to keep on exposing the people the site engages in sex chats, no matter what criticism or consequences it faces.

"We out these people because they need to be exposed," said Von Erck, who refuses to reveal his real name because he says he gets threats from people the site exposes. "We do it as an incentive to get these people to stop soliciting children and to alert parents to what's going on in chat rooms."

In Graves' case, Von Erck said the tactics are justified because Graves teaches children close to the age that the person he was chatting with claimed to be.

Bob Freehan, a spokesman for the Warren Consolidated School District, said Graves "will not be allowed back in the classroom pending a thorough investigation of the situation and appropriate administrative action."

Graves said he will have to resign. "There's no way I can go back to that school with all

the innuendoes," he explained.

He said he hit bottom Monday, when he called in sick and then heard that school officials had been tipped to the incident. With his wife of 19 years at work and his kids at school, Graves said the depths of his despair led him down into the basement of his home, where he dug up an old shotgun he got from his father.

It had a trigger lock, and Graves didn't have the key.

He called a suicide prevention hot line, which alerted Grosse Pointe police. They went to his house, took the shotgun and convinced him to go to Cottage Hospital, where he was checked out by an emergency room doctor and talked with a psychologist.

"I'm going to get help for this," he said in an interview at his lawyer's office Wednesday.

"I really am."