

## **Sexual predators troll Internet to snare innocents Offender lured girl, 15, into sex with promises**

By Amelia Robinson

Lauren Kerr Thomas knew the right words to woo a 15-year-old girl he met in an Internet chat room.

"He was going to be the answer and cure for a 15-year-old's problems," said Riverside police Sgt. J.E. Trego.

Instead, Thomas added problems no 15-year-old should have to face.

He is accused of repeatedly having sex with the girl in hotels in Fairborn and Riverside and at his home in Kinsmon in Trumbull County. He already has been convicted of unlawful sexual conduct charges involving the girl in Montgomery County.

Now he faces kidnapping, rape and unlawful sexual conduct counts in Greene County Common Pleas Court early next year on the Fairborn accusation, and in a Trumbull County court in March or April.

Investigators say Thomas, 45, is a typical Internet sex "traveler" who preys on children met via the Internet.

These predators pull out the stops to impress their young, smitten prey, FBI Special Agent Barry Maddox said. Maddox is spokesman for the Baltimore field office, the base of the bureau's Innocent Images National Initiative, whose aims includes identifying, investigating and prosecuting Internet sexual predators.

Thomas' attorney Richard Reiling did not return calls for comment.

Fresh flower petals were found on the bed in a hotel room one predator planned to use for a romantic evening with who he thought was a 13-year-old girl, Maddox said. The reality: the 13-year-old was an FBI agent. Other predators have bought lingerie in hopes their adolescent victims would model for them, Maddox said.

In Thomas' case, he told the girl he loved her and promised her a car, an apartment and a new life in Canada, police reports said. He showered her with gifts - an ankle bracelet, toe and finger rings, a hooded sweater, marijuana, spiked heels and lingerie.

"It's taboo. (Adolescents) want to try it. They think they can handle it," said Xenia police Detective Alonzo Wilson. "They think they love these guys. Once these guys get them hooked, it's hard to stop them."

Wilson is member of Xenia's Internet Child Protection Unit, which since 2000 has netted about 55 people accused of being Internet predators.

One Miami Valley girl said she was drawn by the mystique of a relationship with an older guy.

"Nicole" was a vulnerable, plump, friendless 12-year-old outcast when MBEALER1 began instant messaging her in an online game room in 1998. He said his name was Michael Bealer and he was 19 and from Oklahoma. Nicole, whose real name is not being used, was intrigued.

"He said all of the cool things. . . . I was just glad someone was paying me some attention," said Nicole, now 17. "Most little girls will take attention any way they can get it."

Over the next days, the conversation became sexual and cybersex began. Eventually, MBEALER1 asked Nicole to move to Quapaw, Okla., and to send him sexy photos and letters, authorities said.

"He built up to it," Nicole recalled. "He started asking questions. You can tell by the responses (how far someone will go)."

The relationship ended when Nicole's parents read an explicit letter she planned to mail to Michael Bealer, really Christopher M. Huston. They called Fairborn police. It turned out the cool guy with the self-described long, red hair and hazel eyes lived in an efficiency apartment with his parents. Huston was convicted in Oklahoma of two counts of making indecent proposals to a minor and sentenced to a seven years in prison.

Nicole's mother, "Karen", said she understands why her daughter was attracted. "She had been lonely. She had it rough with kids picking on her all the time. I think those jerks just look for cracks," Karen said.

The mother of three didn't think her child could be victimized and had told her of Internet dangers. "I was really surprise that would happen in my house. I thought I would be on top of it," she said.

Joy Ott, a child psychologist at Children's Medical Center, said adolescents are particularly susceptible to the abuse because they are sexually curious, rebellious and feel they are invincible.

"Teenagers are always looking for someone that they feel understands them," she said. " (The predator) says, 'You're right. Your parents don't understand you. I understand you.' " Some Internet predators live in a fantasy world, said Katya Gifford, a program director for Cyberangels.org, the Guardian Angels' online safety, education and help site. The Internet provides some the arena to fulfill illicit desires, she said.

"It takes people faster into that fantasy and eventually, that fantasy takes them off line," she said. "(The predator) never would have acted on it in his own little town where everyone knows everybody."

For Thomas' 15-year-old victim, the face-to-face meeting turned into sex at a local hotel within walking distance of her high school, police said. For that, Thomas was convicted in Montgomery County on three counts each of corrupting another with drugs and unlawful sexual conduct with a minor. Thomas is in the Correctional Reception Center in Orient on the Montgomery County convictions.

He now faces trials on 31 counts of unlawful sexual conduct with a minor, three counts of rape and one kidnapping charge in connection with meetings with the girl in Fairborn and Trumbull County.

Shortly after reporting her missing April 4, the 15-year-old's parents searched her school locker and found notes with information about Thomas, who was charged in 1998 with gross sexual imposition in Trumbull County.

Trumbull County sheriff deputies found notes on 145 Internet screen names with users' physical descriptions and contact information in Thomas' home, according to Riverside police reports. Officials also found letters from other underage girls and evidence that Thomas traveled to South Carolina to have sex with a teenage girl there, according to police.