



Cyberangels take on the Net's evils

By Tamara E. Holmes, USATODAY.com
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If you came across a Web site that featured child pornography, would you know what to do? What about if you suspected you were the victim of online fraud? Or found yourself harassed by a predator who sent you a chilling instant message whenever you logged onto the Net?

Though you may never find yourself in such precarious situations, many Internet users will.

But luckily an organization of volunteers is waiting to help.

An offshoot of the safety organization The Guardian Angels, Cyberangels.org hopes to do for the Net what its precursor did for communities around the world.

Take a quick look around the site and you'll see that it's off to a good start.

Led by lawyer and author Parry Aftab, the site features a host of information on what to do and where to turn should cybercrime hit home.

When Aftab was approached in 1995 by Guardian Angel founder Curtis Sliwa about heading the group, she agreed to do it only temporarily. But a child-pornography tip brought her to tears and persuaded her to stay.

For that, the Web community should be grateful.

The site is a beacon of safety on the Net, with vast resources on what constitutes cybercrime and what to do about it.

Naturally, Internet newbies are most vulnerable to cybercrimes, deputy executive director Kelley Beatty says. She speaks from experience. Ask what led her to join Cyberangels and Beatty says, "They helped me when I was stalked" about five years ago.

Cyberangels takes all requests for help seriously. Web users can e-mail their problems using a form on the site, and a Cyberangel will respond within 48 hours. A special Cyber911 form is for emergencies.

The next course of action depends on the problem. For example, if a person is being stalked or harassed, a Cyberangel will counsel the victim and suggest that he or she take defensive actions, such as keeping all correspondence from the harasser or getting a new e-mail address. Cyberangels also will work with Internet service providers and law enforcement to track down perpetrators.

A special area on the site for parents offers tips on keeping children away from online dangers. The site's Cyberangels Kids Team is made up of young people who create content on such topics as movies, games and sports that other kids might be interested in.

One of the most useful areas of the site is its list of Cyberangels-approved Web pages.

"We go through the Internet looking for safe sites for kids that receive our Seals of Approval," says "Janice," the volunteer who heads the site review program. "Everything we do helps kids find safe places on the Internet and educates them on how to stay safe."

The organization has about 7,000 volunteers but is always looking for more helpers. Volunteers take part in an orientation program, and those who work with victims must receive police clearance.

"You don't need a certain level of technical proficiency" to volunteer, says "Angelbirdy," who has been volunteering for five months. "Everyone is valuable."

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