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## Making the Web safe for children

The director of Cyberangels collaborates with cops to fight a shadowy Internet menace.

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By Maura Kelly

Aug. 24, 2000 | Attorney Parry Aftab became interested in the Internet as a resource tool in 1990 after opening a private law practice in northern New Jersey. She had been working at a large Wall Street firm, where she specialized in international corporate takeovers, and found that corporate law had not prepared her for the demands of her new clients. So Aftab went online to seek out colleagues who could answer her questions about real estate closings and other small-town legal needs.

In 1994, she read about the Epson e-mail privacy lawsuit -- one of the first newsworthy cyberlaw cases -- concerning an employee who was fired for refusing to agree to the monitoring of her e-mail by supervisors. Aftab wrote a few commentaries about the case, publishing them herself online. National law journals, hungry for content about Web issues, published Aftab's work and journalists began to call for quotes about other cyberlaw cases.

Aftab, a graduate of New York University School of Law, quickly forged a new career as an Internet expert. By June 1998, she was considered such an expert about online legal issues that she was asked to be a keynote speaker at a White House summit on online content in Los Angeles. Following her appearance at that conference, she was approached by Curtis Sliwa, head of the Guardian Angels, a citizens street patrol organization that originated in New York. He asked Aftab to get involved with Cyberangels, a group the Guardians started to "patrol" the Web.

Though initially skeptical -- "I didn't necessarily approve of the Angels," she says -- Aftab was impressed by what Sliwa had to tell her about the Internet education programs Cyberangels was conducting for inner-city kids. She agreed to do some limited pro bono legal work for the group.

Later that year, Aftab decided to give up her primary career for the Cyberangels cause and assumed the role of executive director. She says her change of heart came after she received an e-mail tip through the Cyberangels Web site from someone who was upset about child pornography sites. The e-mail included a picture of graphic sex between an adult and a child "who couldn't have been more than 3 and a half," says Aftab. "I cried for a full hour after I saw that picture, and I have been searching for that girl ever since."

"When I was in law school," she continues, "I used to tease all the people who were going into public service, saying, 'I'll go to Wall Street and make enough money to fund your cause.' But now, I understand. I mean, can you understand the people that put themselves between whalers and whales? Or tie themselves to trees so they won't be cut down? I'm talking about preventing little girls from getting raped or killed."

Despite an arsenal of anecdotes and a strong belief that the Internet is "breeding sexual molesters," Aftab isn't able to produce any statistics to support the claim that there is a cybercrime epidemic in which children are being hunted by adult molesters. She is not discouraged by this, however, insisting that her job is worthwhile if she is able to "save one child" from molestation.

Just last week, however, Aftab signed on with a new law firm -- in the private sector. She will now devote about half her time to Cyberangels. Maura Kelly interviewed Aftab for Mothers Who Think.

**So what exactly does Cyberangels do?**

Cyberangels is a cyber-911 for the Internet. We help law enforcement with cybercrime investigations.

**What kind of law enforcement groups do you work with, specifically?**

We work with the FBI, state police, local police, the U.S. Customs Service and international law enforcement groups around the world.

**What kind of authority do you have to help them?**

We have no "authority," just expertise. We have more expertise than most law officers. Most of them have not been trained in cyberforensics.

**Do training classes for cyberforensics exist?**

Yes. Cyberangels teaches them at police academies. I've also trained the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and we are in the process of working with the U.K. police.

**What kind of expertise does Cyberangels have? And who recognizes you as experts?**

We have expertise in all aspects of cybercrime: cyberstalking and harassment, identity theft, child pornography, luring children into offline sexual encounters, scams against senior citizens -- any crimes that occur using the Internet. We're recognized by the White House, which gave us the President's Service Award [in October 1998], for instance. We are recognized by UNESCO, which recently asked me to head up its Innocence in Danger project.

**Does law enforcement work with other nonprofit groups?**

Sure, the Center for Missing and Exploited Children, groups for women who have been attacked and so on.

**You told me that you came across the picture of the little girl who was being raped because you received an e-mail that listed porn sites. Who sent you the e-mail?**

We have a tip line on our Web site, through which we get 200 tips a day. From those, we find 70 new pornography Web sites a day.

**Child or adult porn sites?**

Regular porn is not our issue. We only deal with criminal activity.

**And what do you mean by "70 new Web sites"?**

Sites that are new to us, that we've never seen before. We report them immediately to law enforcement. The tip I got with the picture of the little girl was the first tip I had received while running Cyberangels. It had about 100 files for graphics and hers was one of them.

**Isn't it illegal for you to even look at the sites? I mean, isn't it illegal for anyone to look at them?**

No, it's not illegal for us to look at porn sites. It is illegal to download child porn. But we don't do that; we just look at URLs that are sent to us and forward on those addresses to law enforcement. Actually, technically, any pictures we look at are "downloaded," in the sense that they are saved in the cache of our Internet browsers. But law enforcement has taken the position that that is not really possession.

**How do you know that the picture that changed your life was actually of a little girl and not a woman morphed to look like a little girl? How do you know it was real?**

When morphing technology is used, a child's head is morphed onto a woman's body. If the picture was morphed, whoever was responsible for creating it would not have used the head of a child so clearly in great pain; they would have used one of a child who seemed to be enjoying herself. Also, the morphing technology that was out back then, two years ago, was not the same technology out today. Morphing is really a very new issue.

Another thing -- this site was clearly not commercial: The backgrounds were very different in each picture and the children all looked very different from each other. It was clearly a child porn site.

**How do you know when a child porn site is really filled with child porn and not morphed images?**

Sometimes children in the images match up with children whose parents have reported them missing. Or there are certain photos that are repeatedly used by child pornographers.

But I should point out that the use of any kind of child porn images, even morphed ones, is illegal everywhere in the U.S. except in the 9th Circuit, which covers California, Washington state and I think Oregon.

**Speaking of the law, let's talk about Patrick Naughton, the former Infoseek executive who was arrested last year in an Internet sex sting and sentenced last week to five years' probation. He also was ordered to pay a \$20,000 fine. What happened with his case? Why did it seem so weak? Is it because there wasn't evidence, because law enforcement entrapped him?**

Bullshit, bullshit. I think that what happened with Naughton was that they moved too fast on the arrest. If they had waited an extra 15 minutes they would have had everything they needed. Naughton made it very clear online what he wanted to do and that he thought he was dealing with a minor. He flew from Seattle to Los Angeles to meet with a minor. And the female law enforcement officer who met him there looked pretty young.

They had basic conversation, but before he said anything like, "Let's go back to my hotel room," or, "This is what I am going to do to you next," they arrested him. He claimed he was only fantasizing about having sex with a kid and wasn't actually going to do it -- and yet he got on a plane and flew to another place to meet her? Bullshit. So Naughton was convicted of having child porn, but the jury was hung on the child-luring charge.

**You mentioned to me that you are still looking for that little girl whose picture changed everything for you. How are you looking for her? Is there anyone else looking for her?**

There's a new technology that's just been released from a company in Scotland that actually can trace images. I am working with them to try to use that new technology to trace the image back to where it came from, but we are six months away from being able to do that because it is brand-new technology.

**What's the name of the company?**

I can't disclose that yet because we don't have permission from its investors to do that.

**You've said that Cyberangels returns two or three missing children a week. I'm wondering what you mean by that. What does "returning" them mean and how do you know they're missing?**

Children run off to meet strangers they have met through the Internet and sometimes don't return from those meetings without our help. Their parents find Cyberangels through our Web site or go to law enforcement and say, "Our child is missing. We suspect she has run off to meet her online friend and we don't know where she is. We don't know how to find her."

We work with law enforcement and the victim's parents to figure out where the child has gone by doing things like looking at the child's e-mail account and checking the phone bill for unusual numbers. Our missing-children cases are handled by our special 350-member Cyberangels law enforcement team.

**What exactly is your law enforcement team?**

It is a team of Cyberangels volunteers who are either currently working as police officers or else retired.

**How often have people used the Internet to lure children with the intention of sexually molesting them? There don't seem to be too many statistics on Internet-related crimes.**

**For instance, I have numbers from the FBI's Innocence Images program indicating that approximately 4,512 cases have been "opened" since 1996. But out of those 4,512 cases over the past four years, only 573 have resulted in arrests and just 517 cases have turned into convictions thus far. Also, the convictions are not always for Internet stalking or molestation. It just doesn't seem as if there are a lot of hard statistics out there that would prove that cybercrime is epidemic.**

The only stats I have personally are for cases opened by law enforcement. Last year, in the United States, the FBI opened 1,500 new cases of adults luring children for sexual purposes.

**Right, that number is accounted for in the 4,512 cases I mentioned.**

State and local law enforcement, given the information they have provided to me, opened roughly the same number. Many of these cases involved law enforcement either posing as children initially or acting as the child in question after a child luring was reported. The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children may have the hard numbers on legal cases where children were actually molested. I don't.

**They don't.**

**If you don't have any hard numbers, how do you justify to yourself the work you are doing? Without hard numbers, hard facts, it makes it difficult to understand or believe that Internet crime is a big issue.**

It is reward enough for me when we return home a child who has run off to meet someone she met over the Internet. One child, Maura, only one child saved from molestation, is enough to deserve my time and effort. Many of us never have the opportunity to make a difference in even one child's life. Nothing else means as much. It sounds corny, but it's true.

I know how I would feel if my children were abducted or ran off with an Internet predator and someone helped me bring them home, or prevented their abduction. It would mean everything to me, and other parents tell us our work has meant everything to them. I do it for the kids.