

Othello man loses thousands in marriage scam

Date: 2006-10-28

Thomas Thayer is like many people -- too busy with work and getting by to spend time looking for love.

So the 34-year-old Othello man turned to online dating, and in May began exchanging e-mails with a West African woman he met on the Web site "Incredidate."

Mawuli Azanu, 30, claimed to be from Accra, the capital city of Ghana. One thing led to another, and they were married by proxy in Ghana, and he sent money to pay for her flight to the U.S. and visa.

But the relationship recently disintegrated when Thayer figured out Azanu probably was a man, who with helpers in Taiwan and England had fleeced him for \$4,000.

Although Thayer still is recovering emotionally, he shared his story so others wouldn't get scammed.

"The worst part was, I let that person in so close," he said. "I let my nephews talk to her on the computer. I still have a 4-year-old nephew asking why she isn't here."

Thayer admits he was taken good. He'd wired Azanu money to fly here, even including some extra cash so she could buy African toys for his nephews.

He figured out what was going on when she asked for another \$1,200, supposedly to obtain the signature of a Ghana supreme court judge for an antiterrorism document.

That's when he confronted her about how her stories didn't add up. "I was well on to it by then and said no," he said.

Thayer said he'd turned to online dating after one of his friends met and married a Filipino woman through a Web hookup.

Looking back, he realizes his initial contact with Azanu was one-sided -- that she sat back and took notes while he provided most of the details.

In her online profile, Azanu said she was attending school to become a beautician and enjoyed swimming, reading and romantic movies. She even convinced Thayer to start attending church again, and his parents seemed supportive of their relationship, he said.

"I thought it was going well," he said. "We enjoyed a lot of the same things."

But there were warning signs. Azanu didn't immediately share a photo with him, and she'd contacted him first.

Since, he's found a man using her name on another dating Web site. And he found information about Azanu on www.datingnmore.com, which provides pictures and

information about alleged scammers.

He also set tracers on all e-mails he had received from Azanu, and discovered the personal e-mails came from Ghana and e-mails requesting money came from Taiwan. He also found that a phone call during which Azanu said she needed more money came from a cell phone in England.

Thayer said he tried to complain to "Incredidate" about what had happened, but the site had disappeared. It now looks like it merged with another dating site "CupidUSA."

The state Attorney General's Office has not received complaints about either Web site, said Janelle Guthrie of the Attorney General's Office. But she said the office recommends online daters be wary of profiles without photos or unclear photos, and to consider running a background check on potential dates before meeting them.

The U.S. State Department's Web site also warns about a fraud that's been reported involving people who claim to live in Ghana and who develop a friendship or romantic interest with someone over the Internet. Then they ask for money for living expenses, travel expenses or visa costs.

Thayer wired money to Azanu through Western Union. He later learned it's not necessary for a person to show identification to claim a wire money transfer.

A supply manager for a food processing plant in Warden, Thayer said he works 60 to 70 hours per week, including most Saturdays, which leaves little time for dating. He also doesn't drink anymore, so that rules out the bar scene in rural Othello.

When he turned to the Internet, he joined millions of others. A March report published by the Pew Internet & American Life Project said 15 percent of American adults -- about 30 million people -- said they know someone who has been in a long-term relationship or married someone found online.

But as Thayer knows, many are looking for love in all the wrong Web places.

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