

Romance Scam' victim speaks out on her experience

Green Valley News & Sun, Green Valley, Arizona

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Published: Saturday, August 25, 2007 9:19 PM
MDT

A disturbing new trend in Internet scams is emerging, and seniors are the target.

Seniors looking for love on Internet dating sites with reputable names such as "The Christian Cafe" are finding themselves the victims of an international plot to be scammed out of thousands of dollars. There are all kinds of Web scams out there, but none leave their victim feeling more violated than the Romance Scam.



The premise is deceptively simple. Men and women who typically work out of Nigeria or Russia (but claim to be living in America) develop relationships with Americans they meet on Internet dating sites. They send e-mails filled with romantic poetry and promises of their undying devotion, in hopes that this would assure a cash advance to pay for a fake hotel or plane bill. The victim believes that the relationship is sincere, but ends up with broken dreams and an empty pocket book.

The emotional betrayal may be worse than the lost money.

"This is going to make me think twice about trusting people," said Vickie Forbes, 49, who almost became the victim of a romance scam in July. Forbes, who lives in Tucson and works in Green Valley, is speaking out to help others recognize the warning signs.

"Up until he began asking about the money, we had normal conversations," she said, feeling comfortable enough with the man she met on ChristianCafe.com to begin talking with him on the phone. "He seemed like a genuinely nice person, and he kept in constant contact with me. He called me when he got up in the morning, he wanted me to call him when I got up and when I got back from work."

In hindsight, she says she should have been wary of the over-the-top romantic language in the e-mails, "but at the time, I was just flattered." Photos of her suitor showed him to be an attractive 45-50-year-old man from Italy who had moved to New York, photos she now believes were stolen from an online modeling company.

Inconsistencies in his story had been bothering her, but the red flag began to wave when he asked her to forward \$4,500 to pay for a plane ticket one month after they started talking.

In her search for answers, Forbes came across Romancescams.org, a Web site that has gained national recognition on shows such as “Oprah” and “Maury Povich,” started by a woman who was a victim herself. Through the site, Forbes learned how to trace the IP addresses of the e-mails she'd been receiving. She was shocked to discover that the emails were coming from a computer in Nigeria.

“I was in denial at first” she said. “I never thought something like this could happen to me.”

In April, the U.S. State Department issued an official warning to users of Internet dating services because of the recent resurgence of this particular scam. Romancescams.com says it has more than 7,500 members who have been victimized, with a reported collective loss of more than \$3 billion dollars. There's even an active Yahoo users group dedicated to the subject and several online support groups for victims. The Web site, which has a huge database of “personal scam stories,” user discussion boards, and profile photos being used by known scammers, reports that seniors are especially sought out because they are believed to be more vulnerable than younger internet users.

Though most scammers target Americans, recent Associated Press reports reveal that romance scams are becoming a global problem. Earlier this month, a 56-year-old Australian farmer found himself in extreme danger after flying to Mali to meet the woman he had been talking to through a dating Web site. The “woman” turned out to be a gang of armed bandits who held him hostage for 12 days, beating him and threatening to “hack off his limbs with a machete” if he didn't pay a \$100,000 ransom.

Even though Forbes stopped all contact with her scammer and never sent the money, she says she still feels betrayed.

If you decide to pursue Internet dating, she says, make sure to do it locally so you can meet the person face-to-face. “My advice is to just be careful, and be aware that people like this are out there.”

You can report online fraud of any kind at <http://www.ic3.gov>, the FBI's Internet Crime Complaint Center.

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