

Bad e-romance kindles love of fighting fraud



Jim Gehrz, Star Tribune

Jody Buell of Burnsville was the victim of a scam by a man she was matched with on eHarmony in 2008. She sent \$10,000 in electronic equipment to Ghana before realizing she had been duped. Buell now works with a Yahoo group that helps others who have been victimized by romance scams online.

Woman who lost \$10,000 now helps other online-dating victims.

By **JAMES ELI SHIFFER**, Star Tribune

Last update: January 23, 2011 - 7:18 AM

Jody Buell thought she was falling in love, but she fell for someone who didn't exist.

The Burnsville woman didn't catch on to the scam

until she had spent more than \$10,000 on her online admirer.

Instead of sinking into despair, however, Buell decided to get even.

For the past two years, she has been helping other fraud victims get advice, support and fellowship from an online group called romancescams.org. Since the Yahoo group was founded in 2005, it has helped more than 50,000 people from around the world.

"It's basically a war," said site founder Barb Sluppick, a scam victim who lives in Missouri. "They're battling us for our money. We're fighting back, but we're fighting on our own because the government doesn't seem to want to get involved in this."

Government officials say the biggest hurdle is that the vast majority of suspects are located outside their jurisdiction, usually in other countries. The epicenter of the scams appears to be West Africa, particularly Nigeria, where young men reportedly work through the night in Internet cafes perpetrating dozens of frauds simultaneously.

"I've had scam victims from around the country getting ahold of us because they can't find anybody to pick up their case," said Jim Arlt, interim director of the Minnesota Department of Public Safety's alcohol and gambling enforcement unit. "I am astounded at really the lack of coordinated effort in this area."



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In the last year, the FBI has received more than 4,000 complaints about dating-site fraud, but the agency has no estimate on the financial impact, FBI spokeswoman Jenny Shearer said.

In some cases, the losses are devastating. An Arizona man who contacted romancescams.org said he was taken for \$1 million, and in August a New York man shot himself after losing \$50,000 to an online scammer.

In Australia, romance scams cost an estimated \$6.5 million in 2009. In the United Kingdom, the losses were estimated at more than \$81 million last year.

In Nigeria, the government's main anti-fraud agency put a romance scammer in prison for 28 years, but advocates say that hasn't made a dent in the problem. Ghana still reports about two romance scams a day to its embassy in Washington.

'They find ways in'

The pictures are alluring. On romancescams.org, the impostors includes curvaceous young women, shirtless men with high-wattage smiles and soldiers in uniform.

Their victims bare their scars for others to learn from. From "Hopeless and hurt in Texas" came this lament: "The sad part is i did fall in love with him."

Buell, in her role as a "peer counselor," offered the woman a virtual "hug," telling her she had found "the best support system on the planet."

When Buell first joined the group, Sluppick had to moderate her comments because she was still so angry. Now Sluppick considers Buell her second-in-command.

Looking back at her seduction, Buell said she can't believe she missed the warning signs. She said she decided to tell her story publicly for the first time because she counsels others to feel no shame for being the victims of crime.

"Who in this world does not want or need to be loved?" said Buell, a longtime insurance broker.

In 2008, the popular dating site eHarmony.com matched Buell, 53, with Claude Eichmann, who described himself as a Maryland businessman with an international mining company. Their friendship blossomed by e-mail, instant messaging and phone conversations.

At the time, Buell was searching for a life mate after a breakup. She chose eHarmony because the website appeared to rigorously screen participants. The site, based in Santa Monica, Calif., claims 33 million people have registered with eHarmony since 2000, and it claims to produce the equivalent of 542 marriages each day.

Paul Breton, a spokesman for eHarmony, said he can't disclose the methods his company uses to weed out crooks. But he noted the site also instructs users to protect themselves by recognizing the signs of a fraud -- someone who wants to move too quickly, who draws you into a sudden personal

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crisis, who has a complicated story, who asks for money.

The incidence of fraud "is extremely low and we work very hard to make it low," Breton said. Yet "as fraudsters get more and more sophisticated, they find ways in."

Romance died 'in 15 seconds'

Buell's friendship with "Eichmann" played out over three and a half months. His photo showed a smartly dressed man with unruly black hair. After a number of weeks they exchanged phone numbers, and while Buell was initially put off by his accent, he reminded her that he had grown up all over the world.

"Every time I would raise a doubt or a question, he would have a plausible answer," she said.

The two planned to meet, but first he had to travel to the West African nation of Ghana to open an office. Then troubles began. His office equipment supplier fell through. Could you send money? he asked. Buell refused, but he persuaded her to buy \$10,000 worth of computers and phones and spend another \$1,300 to ship it to Ghana. Buell even included a pair of Timberland boots he coveted, plus a lock of her hair.

Then "Eichmann" became ill and asked her to pay for his malaria medicine. Buell implored him to contact the U.S. consulate, but he resisted the idea, so she went to the embassy website herself. On the home page, she noticed a link to "romance scams."

"I clicked on it," Buell said. "It was like ice went through all my veins. Everything that happened to me was listed on that website. My dream person turned into a nightmare in 15 seconds."

Though she immediately stopped communicating with "Eichmann," he kept calling her. "What's wrong with you, honey? I'm dying," he said on one message. "I know you still love me."

Buell reported the crime to IC3, the federal Internet crime clearinghouse, but she doesn't expect any follow-up.

After Buell's sad encounter, an old boyfriend invited her to go on a bike ride. On the trip, he popped the question. Now she's happily married, but she's not forgetting what happened to her.

"And we are glad you found us too," she wrote to a victim who posted Tuesday. "It's ALWAYS nice to know we've helped just one more person to heal from this insidious crime. Music to my ears. :) hugs - Jody."

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