



STAFF PHOTO/BILL ROBERTS

Tracee Chambers of Flare Modelling Agency encourages teenage models to use caution and never divulge personal details.

Parents must be wary of predators' tricks

BY JEFF MITCHELL
Staff Writer

He was a lonely teenager, just like her. They met in an online chatroom and struck a friendship that led to more. Soon the 14-year-old girl was sending video and still images of herself naked.

What the child didn't know was her friend was actually a 55-year-old man, sitting at a computer in Vaughan. Had the Illinois girl's mother not grown curious about her online relationship and alerted police, there's no way of telling if the activity would have been detected.

The Vaughan man was arrested April 22 and charged with possession of child pornography. Police seized computer equipment, hundreds of CD-ROMs and discs and 1,700 videos from his home.

Det. Const. Kevin Byrnes of the York Regional Police child abuse unit credits the girl's mother with being diligent enough to check into her daughter's online activities. She and the girl went to the police.

"The mother was a little extra-curious, which is what we're asking parents to do," Det. Const. Byrnes said.

He recognizes the dilemma faced by parents whose children are reaching their teens: We want to protect them, but at the same time recognize their need for privacy and their assumption of grown-up responsibilities.

He tempers the debate with a warning: There are many, many predators out there, lying in wait for vulnerable teenagers.

"I think the problem is, we get confused about privacy versus safety," he said. "A kid doesn't need privacy to go on the computer."

"If you want to prevent your kid from getting snatched, tough love is the thing to do."

The stories are enough to send chills down any parent's spine. The incidents unfold in a variety of ways, but the same startling motive lurks at the bottom: Grown men attempting to make contact with young people for the purpose of sexual gratification.

Here are two recent incidents reported by York Regional Police.

• On April 15, they arrested a Bradford man on five charges of criminal harassment, saying he had

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York Regional Police

contacted a number of local teenagers after their pictures had appeared in The Era-Banner.

The man, who identified himself as a New York-based agent, asked the girls if they were interested in modelling, acting or making pornographic videos. He asked them questions about their physical dimensions and offered up to \$15,000 for their services.

None of the local girls agreed to meet with the man and instead contacted police. When they searched his home, police found video evidence his scam had worked in the past, however.

"He's actually met (young women) and there have been videos," Det. Const. Phil Moreau said.

"He's luring these young women into making erotic videos."

Police have asked anyone else who may have been contacted by

the so-called John Allen get in touch with them.

• While they don't believe he intended to meet with the young girls he chatted up on the Internet, police are concerned the Vaughan man arrested April 22 may have coerced some into sending him erotic images of themselves.

After the alert Illinois mother confronted her daughter about her online relationship, they went to local police, who, in turn, contacted the FBI, said Det. Const. Byrnes. That agency alerted the RCMP, which sent a message to York cops.

In this case as well, police have put out an alert, seeking information from anyone else who may have been involved with the suspect. He used a variety of online aliases, including Marco Verdi, a 17-year-old boy, a 38-year-old man named Anthony and his own name.

Police remain concerned about the far-reaching implications of Internet luring, which has been cited in a number of cases that have led to young girls being sexually assaulted by men they met online.

"With luring in general, that is the concern," Det. Const. Byrnes said. "Most luring is for the purpose of meeting."

RED ALERTS FOR MODELS

The Flare Modelling Agency passes along to young people and their parents strong advice about the people they may encounter as they pursue their careers. She lists "red alerts" to be aware of:

• Be cautious of anyone who approaches a young person directly, especially if they ask for home phone numbers or addresses, agency owner Tracee Chambers said. Legit agents will typically pass along their business card and ask that parents get in touch.

• If there's any element of pressure, watch out: One of the lines used by "John Allen", the phoney New York agent, was that he was in town for just a few days and required a meeting right away.

• If anyone asks for money up front, the scam alarm ought to be ringing, Ms Chambers said.

• Watch out for inappropriate suggestions, such as photo shoots of youngsters in bathing suits and such. Legit agents will not suggest activity that's not age appropriate.

Tracee Chambers was particularly troubled by news reports of the Bradford man posing as a New York agent. The owner of Newmarket-based FMI Agency, which grooms youngsters for careers in modelling and acting, said such incidents send a chill through her industry whenever they occur.

Even more troubling, it's an indication predators are everywhere.

"I must say, in the course of 25 years being here, there has been very limited negative press in that area," Ms Chambers said. But (the recent arrest) is a sign they will prey on young girls in small towns and the big city.

"These people are everywhere," Ms Chambers urges young people never to divulge personal information. And she tells them to pay attention to their instincts.

"We talk a lot about that sixth sense — if you feel that hair on the back of your neck rise, listen to it," Ms Chambers said.

Police still want to hear from anyone who may have been contacted by either suspect mentioned in this story. Call the child abuse unit at 1-866-876-5423, ext. 7075, or Crime Stoppers at 1-800-222-8477.

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