

Sweet-talking men lurking online

Asotin County officer warns lonely women of becoming victims of scammers

By KERRI SANDAINE of the Tribune

ASOTIN - Online dating is leading to some broken hearts and empty bank accounts in Asotin County.

Asotin County sheriff's Capt. Dan Hally said in the past year, several local women have reported virtual dating scams that involved sending a stranger money or unknowingly participating in criminal activity.

In each case, the woman believed she had met the "love of her life" online, Hally said.

"So many people overlook huge red flags because of an overwhelming fear of being alone. They have never met these men in real life, and they are desperate for companionship."

The victims are wooed by daily communication, fake photographs and empty promises. In the most recent case, a 46-year-old widow met an individual online and began a virtual dating relationship, Hally said.

"Over the course of the past year, she has sent him more than \$60,000. The money was sent based on promises of love and a long-term relationship, which never developed. She's pretty much out the money."

Another woman was contacted online after her husband died, Hally said. The scammer posed as a friend of her late husband, using information obtained from his obituary.

"The online person became the love of her life. He convinced her he was running an overseas business, and he needed her help. He was allegedly working in Nigeria, and he told her people owed him money. He asked if they could send it to her and then she could wire it to him."

In that case, it turned out to be a Craigslist scam, Hally said. Victims of the scam were sending the Clarkston woman checks and she was depositing them in her account and transferring the money to the man she met online. One check was from an elderly couple for \$9,000.

"She unknowingly participated in a scam, which allowed this person to bilk other victims across the country out of thousands of dollars," Hally said.

A third woman also fell for a Nigerian scam. She was financially strapped, Hally said, and went to work for an online contact who was supposedly her true love. In that case,

the woman would receive deliveries and ship them to Nigeria. "She unknowingly became part of a criminal network."

The scammers usually target single, middle-aged women, he said. They use phony information, fake photos stolen off the Internet, or from magazines, and constant online communication.

"We are really encouraging people who get involved with an online relationship to never send money, or get involved with any alleged businesses," Hally said. "To be in a relationship, you must meet in person and spend time together. It's very easy to create a fraudulent, or fake profile. Until you meet them, you don't know who you're talking to."

The No. 1 rule of virtual dating is to use caution and common sense, Hally said. If something sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

"In the past, people were taught not to talk to strangers. We are losing that concept with the Internet," he said. "You have to be careful."

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