

SELLING INNOCENCE

Collaborative effort nabs promoters of child porn

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Click. You are now about to enter what law enforcement officials call the sick and salacious Internet world of child erotica, a new and booming nationwide industry.

Children as young as 7 years old are being photographed in provocative poses, wearing skimpy bathing suits, lingerie and wet T-shirts. Surprisingly, the girls' own parents have given their consent for such photos, supposedly so the children can earn money to pay for college.

It is a world of seduction and child exploitation that we would soon uncover through the efforts of two different newsrooms. Our results yielded an FBI probe, congressional inquiries and criminal arrests.

This joint effort allowed two investigative teams to take on a project with a budget far exceeding the norm in a time of newsroom budget cuts. In this instance, it was the contacts made through IRE that proved priceless.

Let's work together

I first heard about the child exploitation story in June 2001 during a phone conversation with fellow IRE member Scott Zamost. "It's going on all over the country with girls 7 to 17 years old," said Zamost, the investigative producer for Miami's NBC affiliate, WTVJ.

Zamost explained that while the station's investigative team had found such a company in Florida, one of the other major players appeared to be a convicted sex offender possibly living in Chicago.

At first I thought Zamost was just calling for help with some local background checks. But then, to my surprise, he made an offer I couldn't refuse: let's work together, share

expenses and land a bigger story.

That's all I needed to hear. Zamost went on to describe what he learned from postings on Internet bulletin boards and Yahoo clubs. I must admit I was hooked on the notion of exposing the exploiters of these children, but I also was enticed by the idea of our investigative units working together.

Still, I had questions. How would we handle confidential sources, raw video, hidden camera footage, expenses? Last but not least, how would we agree on the final product? Most of the questions were solved through the simple fact that we were both part of the NBC owned and operated chain and we both had the same New York-based NBC attorney. We handled the source material based on a trust we built through years of knowing each other's work history and code of ethics.

What would happen during the next five months would lead to one of the biggest stories of our careers and the federal indictment of the kingpin behind a nationwide alleged child porn ring.

Sharing everything

The investigative units at WMAQ-Chicago and WTVJ-Miami combined resources and efforts. Our joint task force would include Chicago producer Michele Rubenstein and

Miami investigative reporter Deborah Sherman. We did something rare in the world of investigative journalism: we agreed to share everything.

It was a huge story and there were many angles to cover. Zamost had learned of two major child erotica operations. The operations had tentacles reaching other states, and our joint efforts turned up girls recruited from across the country including Illinois, Florida, Georgia, New York, Tennessee, Missouri, Michigan, Indiana and Kentucky. Some entered "the business" with hopes of turning into famous and wealthy models, while others appeared to know what they were getting into. Certainly, the most disturbing cases we uncovered were the children forced into the business by their own parents for a cut of the profits.

The combined team was useful in tackling the massive amount of work that included background checks, business searches, department of motor vehicle probes and the arduous task of looking for clues on these Web sites.

The story required more than checking records. At one time, I was crouched low in a dark sedan where I positioned myself during



Gary Smith faces prison time after using young female models to pose on the Internet. He boasted to reporters that he made thousands of dollars a week using the children, but said he only had their best interests at heart.

the undercover part of our joint operation. In a Chicago alley, we got one of our biggest breaks in the case when one of the men we were looking for, Gary Smith – a self-proclaimed high roller in the child modeling industry – turned up.

Smith, who was incredibly elusive up to that point, used post office boxes to do business and kept the location of his child photo studio a secret. Ironically, the location where we ended up finding Smith running his multi-

million dollar operation was the same address he registered on the Illinois State Police list of convicted child molesters.

I soon spotted young girls in bikinis walking out of Smith's Chicago home. I noticed still and video cameras, and made a positive identification of Smith based on a mug shot we obtained through local police sources. Immediately, I called Rubenstein in our Chicago newsroom. She rushed to the scene with our photographer and undercover equipment. During our stakeout, we wrote down license plate numbers of the models old enough to drive.

Once again our collaboration with WTVJ paid off. While on the stakeout, we were in constant contact with Zamost in Florida via cell phone as he searched Smith's Web site helping us with clues on where Smith might be going next with his young models. His efforts found Smith's general itinerary for the day's photo shoot.

Zamost, along with Rubenstein, found gold mines of information online, including the location of confidential sources to interview about the inner workings of this industry. And, by joining Web sites, they learned how the operation functioned: customers pay a membership fee and get access to a menu of photos and poses. For additional fees, the girls will do custom shoots with clothes mailed to them by members. Further, there were videos for sale featuring girls getting dressed for school or washing cars. The minors would talk to the camera during the video shoots, making it very intimate for customers paying up to \$100 per video.

Authorities move in

We landed another key piece of information when Zamost's team found the partial license plate of a teen model. Gary Smith sold videotapes of his models, but was careful not to include address numbers, street signs, or any kind of locators to figure out exactly where his operation or models might be located. After hours of review, Zamost was able to decipher a Missouri license plate number from a freeze frame of video.

This discovery allowed us to trace the real identity of a 16-year-old model named "Molly." Finding her led to a critical amount of new information about how some of these girls are recruited, strung along and then betrayed.

The onion was beginning to peel and soon Rubenstein would find herself undercover

with hidden cameras at a Halloween party where Smith allowed teenage models to meet their fans in person. Inside, we found minors from both Illinois and Florida. We confronted Smith but he laughed at our questions, telling us he had only the best interests in mind for his child models, boasting they make thousands of dollars a week. He confirmed he was under federal investigation and encouraged police to raid his operation claiming they would find "nothing."

But during our investigation we learned from a court record search in Arkansas that Smith was in violation of his sentencing agreement connected to a prior child sex abuse case in Fort Smith, Ark. We asked Smith about the violation, but he claimed it wasn't true. When we spoke to authorities, they immediately issued a warrant for his arrest.

We were there as the Cook County officers brought Smith out of his Chicago modeling studio in handcuffs, and we watched as they confiscated all of his computer equipment, thousands of computer discs and videotapes. The evidence was turned over to the U.S. Department of Justice for forensic testing. Smith was indicted in April by a U.S. Attorney's office in Missouri.

A federal affidavit in the case reveals the importance of the Chicago raid on his operation and how child porn was found on his computers.

The best customers

Meanwhile, in South Florida, Zamost and Sherman were hard at work on the trail of another large child erotica operation. The initial tip was that a Florida company that operated adult porn sites also was running these child sites. Day after day, their team waited outside offices and homes where they had information linking the principals of a company peddling the pictures of these children. Finally, their team made contact with the man who was actually taking the pictures. During a meeting with him, he disclosed that his most popular model was a 12-year-old girl nicknamed "Little Amber."

Zamost and Sherman already knew a lot about the girl's Web site. They knew she lived on a farm somewhere in South Florida, but were not sure of the county. They searched the hundreds of photos on her site looking for clues, and found one with the girl and her mother posing at a mall. A shopping bag and specific distinctions in the mall picture led

them right to a store the mother frequented.

Now that they had the general area pinned down and knowing that Little Amber lived on a farm, they took the photo to horse feed stores in the area and finally found one where the family shopped for supplies. After three days, they were able to locate the family's rural neighborhood.

Like the other child models from Florida, the Miami investigative unit had discovered Little Amber's mother had given approval to sell her daughter's pictures and videos on the Web – images that clearly exploited the child, according to an official from the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. Now that they knew the true identity of Little Amber and her mother, Zamost and Sherman also learned that mom appeared nude on a pornographic Web site.

Finally, Sherman was able to make a definitive link to the customers of these Web sites. She traveled to North Carolina where she found a convicted sex offender downloading child porn – and picture after picture of Little Amber. He admitted on camera that these child "modeling" sites cater primarily to people like himself.

U.S. Rep. Mark Foley of Florida, who heads up the Missing and Exploited Children's Caucus in Washington, D.C., called for a federal investigation and soon there were new developments. The "Little Amber" site shut down because of the publicity, although the company still runs its other child modeling sites. We learned five people involved with these Web sites were arrested or indicted in Missouri and Arkansas for possessing child pornography.

U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk of Illinois has teamed up with Foley. The two wrote letters and sent tapes of both investigative series to U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft, urging him to take action against the people behind these Web sites.

Finally, in Chicago, we found out from government sources that Smith is now under investigation for forcing a 12-year-old to pose nude for what he allegedly referred to as "golden pictures" – a photo collection of nude minors only for sale to his best customers.

Dave Savini has won IRE Awards for work in 2000, 1999 and 1998. WMAQ and WTVJ'S "Selling Innocence" investigations have been honored by RTNDA with Edward R. Murrow regional awards.