
Posted on Sun, Jun. 17, 2007

Tarrant sex predators active on MySpace

By MELODY McDONALD

Star-Telegram staff writer

FORT WORTH -- Tarrant County prosecutor Lori Varnell looked at the teen-age girl's MySpace page, and a red flag went up.

The teen had included too much personal information -- enough for anyone, including a sexual predator, to find her.

With a few clicks of a mouse and an online directory, Varnell quickly had the girl's phone number and address. Later, Varnell drove to the girl's home, pulled into her driveway and called her mother.

"Look out your door," Varnell told the woman. "See the headlights out here? I'm a prosecutor and I found your daughter from her MySpace page. She is 16. She goes to a school near me. You definitely want her to take it *down*."

Months after personally educating that mother about the dangers of MySpace, Varnell and research assistant Linda Eakman embarked on a project to find out how many registered sex offenders in Tarrant County have MySpace pages.

The results were eye-opening: Of the 2,800 registered sex offenders in Tarrant County, Varnell and Eakman randomly selected 837 of them. They found that 79, or 9.4 percent, had a MySpace page.

"And that," Varnell said, "is just the ones who say where they are located and give their real name."

'Zero tolerance'

The fact that registered sex offenders are signing up with social networking Web sites is no surprise to anyone -- especially MySpace.

Last month, MySpace partnered with an online identity and background verification company and created a database to identify and weed out registered sex offenders. They have removed at least 7,000 profiles from the site since May and began passing those offenders' names along to attorneys general across the country.

"We have zero tolerance for sex predators on MySpace," Hemanshu Nigam, chief security officer for MySpace, said in an e-mail. "We took the initiative to ... identify, remove and block any convicted sex offender we find on MySpace and share this intelligence with law enforcement."

And while the names of sex offenders are helpful to law enforcement officials, officials said it is not against the law for sex offenders to use the Internet or MySpace unless they are on probation or parole and have been ordered not to use a computer. And some sex offenders could lie and change their profile. Officials agree that the only real way to protect children from online sexual predators is for parents to monitor their child's MySpace page and Internet use.

"MySpace's willingness to provide these names to local law enforcement is a step in identifying these predators, but parents should continue to be vigilant in engaging their children about their online behavior," said Jerry Strickland, a spokesman for Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott's office. "Parents have to take an active role by monitoring the child's online activity and talking to them about the real dangers that are out there." Last week, Abbott's office arrested seven sex offenders who had MySpace profiles, as part of a nationwide crackdown to remove predators from the networking site. Of the arrests, one sex offender was in the Dallas area, two in the Austin area and four in Houston.

Sex offenders, particularly child molesters, typically have their computer use restricted when they are sentenced to probation and when they are released from prison on parole.

Keeping tabs

Sitting in her office last week at the Tarrant County district attorney's office, Varnell, a computer crimes prosecutor who frequently gives lectures about Internet safety, said she sees "absolutely no reason" for adolescents or teenagers to have a MySpace page.

"I have yet to see one valid reason put forth for a child having their personal advertising space out there," Varnell said. "Why do they need to have a personal advertising space? Inevitably, the pictures that show up on MySpace are not Sunday school pictures."

Varnell rattles off frightening statistics and tells unsettling stories, including the one about Kacie Rene

Woody, a 13-year-old Arkansas girl who was raped and killed by a 47-year-old man she had met on the Internet who tracked her from California to her home.

"She chatted with a man one time in a chat room," Varnell said.

And while Varnell makes it clear she is not a fan of the networking site, she acknowledges that it is unrealistic for parents to prevent their children from having a MySpace page. "You're going to be fighting a big battle and, if you can win that battle, great," Varnell said. "However, if they are going to have a MySpace page, the parent absolutely has to have the password to it. They have to have full access to it, to see what is going on."

Debbie Dreyspring is among the parents who now keep a close eye on her 14-year-old daughter's MySpace page. About a year ago, she said she learned her daughter and one of her friends were talking to people they didn't know.

"We came down pretty hard on them," Dreyspring said. "Now, you have to know her password to get on it."

Out of all her daughters' friends, "pretty much everyone" has a MySpace page, Dreyspring said.

"It is second only to their cellphones," she said.

Burden on parents

There is no way to know for sure the number of crimes being committed by predators using MySpace, but officials said it's on the rise.

Varnell said if Tarrant County is representative of other counties and states, 10 percent of registered sex offenders could have a MySpace page.

"Would you let your child alone in a group of 100 people that you didn't know, strangers, knowing 10 of them were sex offenders and then leave the room? It just doesn't make sense."

Jason Illian, chief executive of myspacemykids.com and author of *MySpace MyKids*, a Web site and book that helps parents understand the power of social friendships and how to protect their kids in the virtual environment, says parents must protect children from sexual predators by educating themselves about the Internet.

"Your kids are in danger of this every day and not just online," he said. "If you are not going to take an active role in your kids' life, don't complain if MySpace or MTV raises them."

Varnell recalled the conversation she had with the girl's mother after showing up at her home. The woman was shocked, she said, and seemed receptive to her suggestions that the Web site be removed.

Varnell checked again last week, however, quickly typing information into her computer. Within seconds, the girl's MySpace page came back up.

"They don't care," Varnell said throwing her hands into the air in frustration. "That is exactly part of the problem."

Internet safety tips for parents

Teach your children not to give out personal information such as their last name, your last name, their home address or phone number, especially in a chat room, over a bulletin board, or to an online pen pal without your permission.

Make sure your kids know not to agree to a face-to-face meeting with someone they meet online.

Instruct your children never to respond to e-mail or chat messages that make them feel uncomfortable or from someone they don't know. Stress that they should show such messages to you.

Surf the Internet with your kids or talk to them about the Web sites they are visiting.

Place the computer in a public room in your home so that you can monitor its use. Do not allow computers in bedrooms or the use of webcams.

Establish ground rules for Internet usage, including the hours your children may surf and the kinds of Web sites they may visit. Post the rules near the computer.

Learn how to use parental controls and archiving features. You should be able to check your child's e-mail account and review the sites your child has visited on the Internet.

Source: Texas attorney general's office, www.oag.state.tx.us

For more information

www.playityybersafe.com

www.childrenspartnership.org

www.cybersmart.org

www.safekids.com

Source: Lori Varnell, Tarrant County district attorney's office

Children on the Internet

About 1 in 5 received a sexual solicitation or approach over the Internet in the past year.

1 in 33 received aggressive sexual solicitation.

1 in 4 had unwanted exposure to pictures of naked people or people having sex in the past year.

1 in 17 was threatened or harassed.

Source: Lori Varnell, Tarrant County district attorney's office

What parents need to know

Your child's screen names

What sites they are on

Their friends' screen names

Who is on their buddy list

What their profile says

Source: Lori Varnell, Tarrant County district attorney's office