



October 2, 2006

Hi-Tech Stalking Devices Extend Abusers' Reach

By Marie Tessier, WeNews Correspondent



Sherri Peak

(WOMENSENEWS) – As Sherri Peak ran errands in suburban Seattle, she often saw her estranged husband in the rearview mirror of her Toyota Land Cruiser. Robert M. Peak showed up at her Bellevue business, at restaurants, at shops in downtown Seattle, and at the homes of co-workers.

The couple separated in July 2005, as Sherri Peak sought to escape what she describes as her husband's controlling behavior.

According to her claims during a subsequent criminal investigation, by August, he was phoning Sherri Peak's co-workers repeatedly to find out where she was. She was being stalked, a pattern of behavior that is linked to a higher risk for homicide. In October, terrified, she filed for a protective order to keep him away.

Robert Peak had also found invisible ways to monitor his wife, though it would take months to unravel what they were. Once, Sherri Peak told a friend that she was going to notify police that he had violated the protective order, and Robert Peak went to the police station first to tell them the incident was nothing, she says.

"This is a case of 'watch him come kill me,'" Sherri Peak told Women's eNews. "He used technology to threaten, control and hold me hostage."

In early 2006, trusting her instincts but unable to find a tracking device herself, Sherri Peak brought her SUV to the Bellevue, Wash., police. Two hours into an inspection assisted by immigration and customs agents, and on the verge of giving up, investigators popped off the dashboard.

Inside, they found a cell phone with a Global Positioning System, or GPS. The phone was hooked to the battery of the vehicle, and programmed to pick up silently whenever he called. Once the phone answered, her stalker could monitor the precise location of her SUV via the Internet.

Technology Assists Stalkers

As GPS systems get smaller and cheaper, and as cell phone and computer monitoring software becomes standard in families concerned about Internet safety, Sherri Peak's experience of intimate partner stalking is becoming more common, law enforcement officials and advocates say.

Type "spouse" combined with "track" or "spy" into any Internet search engine, and consumers are offered myriad products from hidden cameras to GPS devices to computer software, all at low prices. "Monitor any PC from anywhere!" one ad promises. "Catch a spouse in the act!" another says.

Safe cell phones and secure computers are often a central part of battered women's safety plans, as they seek to escape abuse. However, abusers increasingly are using phone records, computer software that displays every key typed, and other technologies to stalk, monitor, control and terrify their victims.

"For an abuser, it's all about power and control," says Cindy Southworth, director of technology at the National Network to End Domestic Violence in Washington, D.C. "Abusers have always monitored their victims and stalked them when they tried to leave, but now they can do it with new technologies."

Criminologists know that a stalking victim's terror is well founded. Studies have shown that stalking is a red flag showing a high risk of a woman's homicide. Nine out of 10 women killed by intimate partners have been stalked during the previous year, research shows. One-third of women stalked by a current or former partner are sexually assaulted, according to the National Institute of Justice, a government research office.

When police searched Robert Peak's home, they found Sherri Peak's e-mails, including correspondence with police and her divorce attorney, and the spyware program he had used to obtain them.

Access to House Keys and Passwords

They found passwords and account numbers he had hacked from her computer. They found a set of keys to the new locks Sherri Peak had put on her home. In August, Robert Peak was sentenced on felony stalking charges to eight months at King County Jail in Washington, according to the Seattle Times. He is on a work release program, but stays in jail at night and on weekends.

Robert Peak, through his attorney, declined to comment for this story.

In a similar case in Arizona last summer, the felony stalking conviction of former Major League Baseball outfielder Albert Belle exemplifies how 3 of every 4 stalking victims are terrorized by threats of violence or death at the same time that they are being monitored and followed.

Belle's ex-girlfriend told police that he was showing up "everywhere she went," such as the store, on dates, and at the gym. He left a phone message saying she needed to hire a bodyguard

for protection and that she “would never know what hit her,” according to news reports of court statements.

But it wasn't until she drove over a bump in the road and heard something fall off her car that the woman, whose identity has been kept out of the news, discovered the GPS device. Belle was sentenced to 90 days in jail after pleading guilty in July, according to TV network ESPN. The judge vowed to put him in prison if he ever contacted the woman again.

Stalking convictions like those of Belle and Robert Peak are increasing, but are still not routine.

Because infractions tend to happen over a long period of time, at varied times of the day, and often in a variety of jurisdictions, it is difficult and time-consuming for police and prosecutors to build a successful case, attorneys say. Even then, it is difficult for juries to grasp the depth of fear and control that perpetrators have created for a victim.

“When a victim presents herself to law enforcement, it doesn't necessarily look that dangerous,” says Sandy Bromley, an attorney with the Stalking Resource Center at the National Center for Victims of Crime in Washington, D.C. “Individual incidents alone usually would not be criminal, but when you add them together in a pattern of following, calling and using technology to track a victim, it becomes a type of behavior that is designed to induce fear. And it works.”

Trusting Instincts

Advocates and law enforcement experts have two basic pieces of advice for people who think a partner or former partner has too much information about them. “First, trust your instincts,” says Southworth of the National Network to End Domestic Violence. “If you think a partner or former partner knows too much about you, it's probably true.”

Second, it can be critical to a woman's safety to avoid tipping off a stalker by disabling monitoring devices. Rather, a victim should work with law enforcement officials, a local domestic violence agency or the National Domestic Violence Hotline to develop a safety plan, advocates say.

In the digital age, a routine look at a computer's Web visit history could reveal a search for a new apartment, a new job or a new location, according to the Stalking Resource Center. Even making seemingly common sense moves such as searching for spyware and erasing it from a home computer can trigger an escalation in violence, advocates say. Such a move could also destroy evidence necessary to bring a criminal prosecution or to obtain a civil protection order.

In the meantime, pursuing a criminal case is a process that takes an average of two years, even as a woman lives in fear, Bromley says. It's also often necessary because research shows that stalkers are usually obsessive, difficult to deter and likely to escalate their behavior at any time.

And then a perpetrator is released from jail, as Robert Peak will be later this year. The Peaks' divorce is set to proceed early next year. Custody and visitation of their two children will be at issue.

“I would say this experience has been like being hostage in your own life, someone always knowing where you are, what you’re doing,” Sherri Peak says. “And it’s a very, very scary thing.”

Marie Tessier is an independent journalist who covers national affairs, and writes frequently about violence against women.

This series is supported by a special grant from Mary Kay Inc.

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“Dangerous Trends, Innovative Responses” -
<http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/2906/>

Mary Kay Charitable Foundation, Domestic Violence Resources -
<http://www.mkacf.org/Violence/ResourcesForEndingViolence.html>

The Stalking Resource Center at the National Center for Victims of Crime -
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