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Local News

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Computer sleuths bring crime to light

Viewing porn is difficult part of sheriff's office job

BY FREDERICK MELO
Pioneer Press

When Coreen Kulvich and Meredith Tanner explore hard drives and Zip disks, they're hunting more than just bytes of data. They're looking for convictions.

Kulvich, 29, and Tanner, 28, make up the Dakota County Sheriff Department's small but increasingly vital computer forensics team. Launched in 2003, the unit has played a central role investigating some of the county's most sensitive criminal cases — from a school administrator charged with hoarding thousands of images of child pornography to a Farmington police officer recently convicted of having a sexual relationship with an underage high school student.

Because the only computer forensics investigator at the state's Bureau of Criminal Apprehension is backlogged, police departments across the county have increasingly turned to Kulvich and Tanner for help. In Dakota County, only Eagan maintains its own computer forensics specialist.

That places a special demand on the women's techno-savvy.

"Initially, when we started it, we thought Coreen would be half- to three-quarter time, and Meredith would fill in," said Capt. Bradley Wayne, who runs the sheriff's investigations division. Instead, Kulvich, a detective, has her hands full digging through computer evidence full time, and Tanner, an information technology specialist, splits her duties between the sheriff's department and other county offices.

Their findings have helped garner convictions on everything from arson to tax fraud, but about half of the 36 forensics examinations they've completed in the past year relate to child pornography or sex crimes.

"Reviewing the child pornography is the most disturbing part of my job, but there's also the reward — that I'm part of the (justice) process," Kulvich said.

So are they techies? Geeks? Eggheads? A few years ago, they maintain, neither one of them would have expected to one day become the Sherlock Holmes of cyber-sleuthing.

Neither Kulvich nor Tanner has a degree in computer forensics or, for that matter, any other type of computer science.

"I don't go home at night and play with the computer," said Tanner, who graduated from Carleton College in 1998 with an undergraduate degree in psychology.

Instead, the pair impressed their bosses by taking interest in some of the more technical aspects of law enforcement.

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Before joining the computer forensics unit, Kulvich investigated welfare fraud, and Tanner, who had no previous training in law enforcement, worked in computer support.

"I hired Coreen when she was 20 and promoted her to detective at 25," said Dakota County Sheriff Don Gudmundson. "(Tanner) was also someone who you could tell from the very beginning was interested in what we do here. You could tell by her questions. In important cases, she would show up in court."

The attention and recognition that Kulvich and Tanner have earned within the department underscore the importance law enforcement authorities are now attributing to computer evidence — an increasingly key component in making serious charges stick.

From cell-phone text messages to e-mails and Internet downloads, computers can cough up an incriminating history.

About "93 percent of all information created is now created only electronically, and the vast majority of that — at least 70 percent — never migrates to paper," said attorney Kristin M. Nimsger, vice president of legal technologies for Kroll Ontrack, a national data recovery company based in Eden Prairie.

"In many cases, it is not only the best sources of information, but the only source of information, particularly in child pornography cases," Nimsger said. "Pornographers aren't taking those pictures to Wal-Mart anymore to get developed."

One of the most timeconsuming and labor-intensive cases to cross Kulvich's and Tanner's desks involves an administrator from the Rosemount-Apple Valley-Eagan school district, who was arrested in January after a co-worker found images of child porn on an office printer.

Prosecutors said Donald Brundage, 59, of Minneapolis had more than 100,000 pornographic pictures in one computer folder alone — the majority of them involving young girls. His next scheduled court appearance is Monday.

Kulvich and Tanner, who would talk about the case only in general terms, have been going through Brundage's computer files — which include photos and streaming Internet videos — since mid-January, trying to determine which ones depict minors. Those images are forwarded to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, which tries to match them to known abductions and instances of abuse.

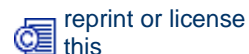
"They want to know that the victim is a real person" as opposed to a "morphed" image manufactured using software, Tanner said. "Child porn is very sad. It's very jarring, (but) knowing that we're doing something about it is good.

With the department scheduled to renovate its jail over the next year, the computer forensics unit is likely to move into a workspace about three times the present size of its current offices.

Across the state, other law enforcement agencies wish they had similar in-house resources to bring to bear on computer investigations.

"In Minnesota, our backlog is about six months, from the time we get a computer in," said Rick Anderson, a commander with the St. Paul Police Department assigned to the Minnesota Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force.

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