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Black Diamond Data_

COMPUTER FORENSICS

Tech-savvy sleuth fights for cybercrime victims

Specialist helps singer regain Internet identity

By Robert Salonga

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PITTSBURG — In a realm where international boundaries create barriers that help Internet criminals avoid prosecution, there's a fight going on to close these loopholes.

One of the battlefields, it turns out, is a nondescript three-room back office in Old Town Pittsburg.

It's nearly impossible to tell that there is a computer-laden nerve cen-

ter nestled within, run by A.J. Fardella of Black Diamond Data.

The computer forensics expert specializes in mining systems for data and auditing their security, but his job has also taken on a crime-fighting component.

"I can tell if someone's lying through their computers," Fardella said.

That's where Leandra Ramm, an accomplished opera singer, enters the story. Ramm has spent the past six years in a virtual prison built by a stalker living in another hemisphere.

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SUSAN TRIPP POLLARD/STAFF

A.J. Fardella runs Black Diamond Data, a computer forensics firm in Pittsburg.

Fardella

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In the United States, a quarter of the 3.4 million stalking victims recorded in 2006 — the most recent year for which statistics were available — were the targets of cyberstalking, according to the federal Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Harassing emails are involved in 83 percent of those cases. In Ramm's case, she received 4,917.

According to affidavits filed with authorities in Singapore, Ramm has been the victim of an online smear campaign by a man who became obsessed with her since watching a 2005 CNN appearance.

The man gained her trust, purporting to be a director for a Singapore music theater offering work for Ramm. But when his false promises were exposed by friends and colleagues, they along with Ramm saw an ugly side of the Internet they felt powerless to stop.

A series of websites tarnishing Ramm's reputation began popping up in Internet searches. The virtual assailant harassed Ramm, her friends and potential employers, who decided that signing her on was not worth the baggage that he had created for her.

"I was a liability," Ramm said. "They didn't want to deal with the stress and drama."

Ramm turned to authorities in New York — where she was living — and the FBI, all of whom considered themselves hamstrung by the suspected culprit being on the other side of the world. Earlier this year, *The Economist*, an international newsmagazine, wrote an item about her plight. But the man remained at large and untouched.

"The whole thing was a living nightmare," Ramm said. "Nothing could be done for years. These were dark times."

"I felt trapped in my own life, and everybody in my life was affected."

Through a chance connection, a mutual friend of

Ramm and Fardella introduced the two this year and suggested he might be able to help her. Fardella, who has contracted work with the federal government including the Secret Service, immediately saw a lot he could do where others had failed by either lack of aptitude or thoroughness.

Fardella's office is a clash of high-end computer hardware and forensic tools — think "CSI" but swap laptops and desktops for dead bodies and shooting scenes — and a scattered collection of pop culture knickknacks, San Francisco Giants memorabilia, training certificates and photos of him with people ranging from Vice President Joseph Biden to rapper and actor Ice-T.

Then there are the piles and piles of backstage concert passes from his work as a stage manager and band technician, a calling from a previous life that included stints working for Journey and which he continues as a side pursuit.

Fardella is a known political figure in segments of the county, where he is a Pittsburg planning commissioner and has been active in school politics in the Mt. Diablo Unified School District, where his children attend school. Both roles, he says, attest to his passion for both his adopted home — he hails from San Francisco — and his children.

When he took on Ramm's case, he scanned the websites created to embarrass her. He pored through the nearly 5,000 emails and additional chat messages, creating a program that would meticulously examine and document his findings to preserve a chain of evidence.

What resulted was a massive packet of information Fardella shipped to the same Singapore investigators who had not responded to Ramm. It didn't hurt that Fardella tapped a Secret Service connection, which happens to have a training center in the strictly ruled city-state.

On July 21, Singapore police arrested Colin Mak Yew Loong and later released him while they continued their investigation, warning

"We need to nail down a structure because people can rip people off from the comfort of their computer."

— A.J. Fardella,
Black Diamond Data

him to not make any contact with Ramm and at least four other people he's accused of terrorizing via the Internet.

Fardella took on the task of getting Loong prosecuted for two reasons: to free Ramm from his wrath and to call attention to the lack of mutual law-enforcement treaties between countries that he believes will become vital as crime migrates from the streets to the Web, which blurs international lines that bind existing police agencies.

"The lack of them is what took six years for action," he said.

Fardella also advocates that comprehensive computer training should become standard down to the beat officer level, to ensure consistency in tasks like preserving computer evidence.

"People have no idea. There has been a 900 percent increase in cybercrime," he said, citing a figure from the 2009 Global Security Conference. "We need to nail down a structure because people can rip people off from the comfort of their computer."

Ramm, who for the past two years has performed on a cruise ship to keep working and regain her privacy, feels her life slowly falling back into place after finally getting some movement on her case.

The day she got word of Loong's arrest remains vivid in her mind.

"I'll never forget that day in a coffee shop in Greece. I've been waiting for that email for six years," she said. "And I haven't heard from him since. I have my life back."

Robert Salonga covers public safety. Contact him at 925-943-8013. Follow him at Twitter.com/robertsalonga.