

Frank Samandari Investigates MySpace.com — Part One

*Winner of the Florida Associated Press Award for Excellence in Broadcasting
Investigative Reporting Division*

by Frank Samandari for WDBO Radio and WDBO.com

It wasn't difficult to get started on MySpace. Within 30 minutes I had created a profile and web page, posing as a female high school student — aged 16. From there, it took no time to get my first proposition — a 28-year-old mortgage broker from Orlando, who wrote he'd like to “touch that little body.” He followed that up with a proposition I can't repeat and then mysteriously dropped 'Chelsea' from his friends list.

That was one of the more tame replies I received. Some of the messages I got during this investigation started with a friendly “hello,” but soon escalated to asking for Chelsea's bra size and if she was a virgin. Some asked if she would ever consider meeting them for sex.

MySpace does not allow users under the age of 18 to create personal profiles, but this age verification is easily bypassed. While Chelsea's page met the age requirements to gain access to the website, it was made clear in the first few lines of the profile that she was actually only 16 years old.

A ‘Big Concern’ for Parents

“A sexual predator or child molester is going to use specific language.”

Youth Officer Nathan Dunn with Oviedo, Florida Police says that language is designed to get a teen alone and possibly in a vulnerable position.

“Would you knowingly go the front door and give the key to your house to a child predator?”

Dunn says by allowing a child to be on the Internet without proper supervision, parents are doing just that.

“There's a really easy way for predators to hide and commit crimes. So, law enforcement is going to step up and we're going to take that on.”

The agency has recently created education forums for parents, raising awareness about MySpace and other social networking websites. Dunn says the problem of sex predators prowling the Internet for young children has always been a big concern for them — and should be a concern for everyone.

“Well, it's my kid and I can just limit what they do. But if they've done it to your child or to you as a student, they're going to do it to someone else.”

In fact, Dunn says many offenders will stop at nothing until they get what they want.

“If they can't find that person, they do a little investigation — find out who the friend is — and say ‘Hey, I'm looking for so and so. I'm here to pick them up.’”

Dunn says sex predators are smooth operators who know just how to lure in a child. And while he understands parents can't monitor their children every moment of the day, he says there are simple, practical solutions to keep everyone safe — such as moving computers to a centralized location, and not allowing kids to have private web access using cell phones and other devices.

“The Internet's not bad, the things on the Internet are not bad, but the people that are behind chat rooms and screen names may be bad.”



The U.S. House of Representatives has recently been reviewing ‘social networking’ websites like MySpace.com.

Lawmakers say they've seen first-hand how sex predators can easily create a false persona online.

Investigative Reporter Frank Samandari went undercover on MySpace.com to find out how just how easy it is for a child to be lured in.

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Kids and Parents React

"I loved MySpace," says sixth-grader Kathryn, but she was told to shut her account down after her mother heard growing concerns about the site. Kathryn told me it's truly a shame, because, she says, there is a great deal of fun to be had on the site.

"That day I had just figured out how to design my page. I was all excited and I got all this neat stuff. I was so excited!"

Kathryn says MySpace is a great way for kids to keep in touch and meet new friends.

"You could sort of tell their personality by what they had on their MySpace. You can post anything you want. My friend had a slideshow of her posing for different pictures."

But Kathryn's mother, Christy, says personality was not *all* you could see on the site.

"I looked at her girlfriend's pages and I was like 'Wow.' Her girlfriend had photographs of herself. A lot of them were pretty enticing."

Christy told me some of those pictures were even borderline provocative. She wonders how safe the social-networking websites really are.

"What's to say anybody can't just pretend they're a 10, 12, 13-year-old child and set up their own MySpace?"

While Kathryn admits she's still disappointed in having to cut her online fun short, she says a recent television report on the websites — and the apparent ease of sex predators to lure children online — was an eye-opener.

"It took him two-minutes-and-thirty-seconds to find out where this girl lives, who she was and how he could get to her."