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July 28, 2007

Parents' Ire Grows at Pedophile's Unabashed Blog

By JENNIFER STEINHAUER

LOS ANGELES, July 27 — The search for the self-described pedophile in the large-brimmed black hat commences nearly every day here, with findings posted on chat rooms frequented by mothers.

He was spotted at a fair in Santa Clarita. He recently emerged from the Social Security office on Olympic Boulevard. He tapped away on a computer at the library in Mar Vista. Warnings have gone out. Signs have been posted.

And yet unlike convicted sex offenders, who are required to stay away from places that cater to children, in this case the police can do next to nothing, because this man, Jack McClellan, who has had Web sites detailing how and where he likes to troll for children, appears to be doing nothing illegal.

But his mere presence in Los Angeles — coupled with Mr. McClellan's commitment to exhibitionistic blogging about his thoughts on little girls — has set parents on edge. One group of mothers, whose members by and large have never met before, will soon band together in a coffee shop to hammer out plans to push lawmakers in Sacramento to legislate Mr. McClellan out of business.

"Just the idea that this person could get away with what he was doing and no one could press charges has made me angry," said Jane Thompson, a stay-at-home mother in East Los Angeles who recently read Mr. McClellan's comment about a festival in her neighborhood in which he seemed to be describing her child.

Ms. Thompson is part of a movement to make it illegal to post images of children of any type on Web sites with sexual content or themes. "It became what I call a minor obsession of mine for the next six weeks," she said, "to get to know his crowd and the things they talk about."

Two months ago, Mr. McClellan said, he was more or less run out of Washington State, where he lived off and on with his parents, after the news media there and various Web sites drew attention to his activities, making him worry about his safety and that of his family. He had been posting nonsexual pictures of children on a Web site intended to promote the acceptance of pedophiles, and to direct other pedophiles to events and places where children tended to gather.

So he moved to Los Angeles, where he was born, to try to live a Southern California version of his former life. The climate was one draw, said Mr. McClellan in an interview near this reporter's office last week. But also "there are so many world-class children's attractions here, Disneyland, festivals and whatnot."

Mr. McClellan has refrained from posting pictures of children on his Web site, which was shut down by its host several weeks ago but which he intends to start again, he said, with a Dutch host. On the site, he has described fairs, festivals and other spots that he hits at least three days a week, all to the fury of parents.

It is both his actions and inactions that vex law enforcement officials here, who, while suggesting that they keep an eye on Mr. McClellan when they can, say they have no legal recourse against him.

"If you look at things he has posted, he clearly is a pedophile," said Lt. Thomas Sirkel, who works in the Special Victi

me's Unit of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department.

"Has he acted on it? I can't say," Lieutenant Sirkel said. "But I've been in this business for 20 years, and I have never seen one who has not."

Mr. McClellan, who is 45, refers to himself as a pedophile, but says he has never actually sexually touched a child, simply "embraced them in a nonsexual way, mostly in Latin American countries." He says he has never been convicted of a sex crime, and law enforcement officials in Los Angeles say they know of no convictions.

A check of available public records yielded no criminal history for Mr. McClellan, including under another name he said he used. Mr. McClellan, who said he was adopted, said he changed his name to that of his birth mother several years ago.

Lieutenant Sirkel would not say whether his department had Mr. McClellan under surveillance.

"Why should I tell him about our tactics?" Lieutenant Sirkel said. But he added: "I'd like to know where he is at, what he is doing and watch him awhile. I think he is possibly a dangerous man. In my opinion, he is a threat to children in this community, and people in the community are really concerned about him."

Two Web-based groups, Peachhead, which caters largely to mothers on the West Side of Los Angeles, and Booby Brigade, its counterpart across town, have been abuzz with chatter about "Jack" sightings, and some parents have taken to posting photos of him in parks, downloaded from the Web.

"This one really angered people," said Linda Perry, who runs Peachhead, referring to Mr. McClellan.

Mr. McClellan has been somewhat elusive. He lives largely in his car, he said, although he says he occasionally rents rooms. Asked how he makes a living, he would say only that he lives off of "public assistance, the kind where you're not allowed to work."

The parental reactions somewhat mirror those in the novel and film "Little Children," in which a community becomes enraged at the notion of a convicted sex offender living in their midst, and chase him down at every turn. Although Mr. McClellan is not similarly pursued, parents who recognize him at events often scream at him, he said, and he fears for his safety enough that he would not meet a reporter in a public place.

Law enforcement officials have clearly taken notice — one mother posted on PeachheadFamilies.com about her husband, a location scout for films, being asked to leave a park where he was using his camera. Mothers from Pasadena to Marina del Rey will soon gather to discuss possible legislative options, Ms. Thompson said.

Theirs will most likely be a difficult road. While posting pictures of children in sexual situations is a felony, posting them fully clothed in everyday situations is not, even in the context of sexualizing them by proxy, so to speak, First Amendment scholars said. Further, while inciting others to commit crimes can be illegal, it is unclear whether giving people links to children's book fairs is criminal.

"It is an interesting case," said Eugene Volokh, a law professor and First Amendment expert at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Professor Volokh cited a federal statute that bars the posting of bomb-making information on the Web, and suggested that a similar statute banning information that helps people find children to molest could be enacted, perhaps. But simply providing information about where children gather was not likely to constitute such a crime, he said.

In terms of children's images, he said: "The general rule is pictures of people in public are free for people to publish. Now if it is without permission and the person is a child and he suggests the children are sexual targets, you can imagine a court saying this is a new First Amendment exception. But it would be an uphill battle."

So for now, then, many Angelenos will continue to track and record Mr. McClellan's every move. Ms. Perry of Peachhead noted that the city was full of convicted child molesters.

"At least we know who he is and what he looks like," she said.

Alain Delaqu re contributed reporting from New York.