

[Print Page](#)

TUESDAY JANUARY 10, 2006 Last modified: Friday, January 6, 2006 10:36 PM PST

Playground for predators? Popular teen Web sites also attract predatory users

By Abby Souza

Jason's online profile said he was an 18-year-old man living in Turlock and going to college. In reality, "Jason" was a 48-year-old man named Greg Ulrich with a history of sexual crimes.

His photo showed him to be a clean-cut young man. In his profile he described himself as tall with an athletic build and that he worked as a rancher making between \$150,000 to \$250,000 a year.

He said he liked to go four-wheeling, back-packing, and fishing and he was a fan of Megan Slankard's music. He had 530 friends in his Myspace.com network, almost all young girls and women.

The Turlock-based Sacramento Valley Hi-Tech Crimes Task Force helped in the criminal investigation of Ulrich, who plead guilty in Sept. 2005 to charges of indecent exposure and annoying or molesting children, according to Stanislaus County Superior Court records and the Megan's Law website.

Web sites like Myspace, Facebook, and Xanga attract millions of users every year, mostly teen-agers and young adults who use the sites for social networking.

A search of Myspace yielded 3,000 users living within five miles of Turlock.

Users are able to post blogs about their daily lives and interests, message friends, and join groups.

While most of the interactions are of an innocent nature, some become more explicit and leave the users vulnerable to sexual predators.

"They are victimized without ever being touched," detective Lydell Wall said.

The Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire conducted a youth Internet survey and found that almost one in every five young Internet users had "received an unwanted sexual solicitation."

Of the 1,501 10-to-17-year olds surveyed, 25 percent said they had been exposed to sexually explicit pictures on the Internet.

Detectives of the Hi-Tech Crimes Task Force said Ulrich had been e-mailing pictures of his genitals to a number of girls on Myspace.

That Ulrich was able to lure so many young girls and women into revealing intimate and personal information about themselves with relative ease doesn't surprise the detectives of the task force.

Many of the kids inadvertently leave themselves vulnerable to sexual predators. Through their blogs and messages, the kids identify what school they go to, what

activities they participate in, and who their friends are.

"Kids don't have a clue that this information is being used to identify themselves as victims," Wall said.

"Typically, they look for kids with some self-esteem issues or those who are having difficulties at home, school, or with friends," Wall said. "They'll use whatever information they can to pose as a friend or someone with a common interest."

"In the old days kids kept their diary under the bed, now it's open for the whole world to see," Detective Kipp Loving said. "And the world is not necessarily a pretty place."

The detectives said that the kids don't know they are being victimized. While the websites try and put up safety guards like age requirements and filter some content, the detectives said there are always ways around them.

The detectives also said the forum of these conversations keep kids from realizing they are being victimized.

"If a young girl was walking through the mall and some older man came up to her and started asking her what her bra size is or what type of panties she's wearing, she would get offended and tell the authorities," detective Ken Hedrick said.

"But she doesn't get offended when it comes over the Internet. Instead she gives him answers because of the privacy and she's not threatened by a keyboard and a monitor. They don't feel it's a danger."

The task force members said teenagers and young adults should be wary of the possible dangers that come with talking to someone they don't really know through these websites.

"The predators goal is always to meet with these kids," Hedrick said. "If they were not interested in meeting a kid, then they wouldn't be talking to them."

"The satisfaction level is always having to be upped," Loving said.

The detectives recommend that parents take more control over the profiles and postings of their kids and to always keep Internet usage in a highly visible and used room.

Software monitoring systems can be very useful but the best method detectives said is for parents to be more aware.

"If you walk into a room and your kid turns the computer off, that's all you need to see," Loving said.

Hedrick recommends that parents be forthcoming with their kids.

"Tell kids about what is going on online and be upfront about the dangers."

-- CLOSE WINDOW--