

Amy's Story

by Anne Collier



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Fifteen-year-old Amy* had been hounding her mother to sign up for Internet service at home. "I kind of had a fear of it," said her mother Sara. "I'd come home with newspaper articles I'd read about kids being lured by adults they'd met online." But Amy was already using the Internet at the public library and school anyway. "She set up her own...account [with a password and free E-mail]."

Sara found out that Amy had been sharing many personal conversations with Bill, whom she had "met" in an online chatroom. They discussed her desire to live her life differently. Bill was "sympathetic" to Amy's dreams and desires. By getting to know and sympathizing with her concerns or fears, Bill was able to break down her inhibitions.

When Amy didn't come home one night, Sara knew something was wrong. So she began a search of Amy's room. "I found a note [Amy] wrote saying she was 98 percent sure she was going to do this [trip]. The note said she'd be getting on a bus." At this same time, Amy was at the bus station on the telephone with Bill. He was saying, "You can't go home now, because I'll get caught." Amy felt compelled to keep him from getting apprehended.

Sara said, "I went to my local police station and tried to get them to go and get her. At that point they really didn't want to do anything. They were thinking she had run away. [We had] the [man's] real name and address...though at that time I wasn't sure it was the real name. I couldn't get anyone to go and see if this was a legitimate address. I found out that in our state runaways don't have to return home if they don't want to."

Sara called the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC). Sara said it was that call that got the police to check out the address on the ticket and "find out whether...this person actually existed."

A detective had called to say the man's address was a computer dating service. "It turned out this is where that man worked, and he lived upstairs," Sara said. The police said they'd watch the location.

About midnight an officer called in and said, "A taxi just pulled up, a guy and a girl got out of it, we think it's them." He said, "We need to find out [from Amy] if she wants to stay. In order to get her [without her consent], we'd have to get a court order showing the reason why we wanted her out." Sara had to talk



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to Amy on the telephone and promise not to press charges before Amy would agree to go home.

"We had a 36-hour bus ride back [home].... At first she was really upset. She definitely wanted to be with this man. He'd been telling her, 'I'm in love with you, you're the only one I've ever done this with, you just have to come with me and when I put you up it's going to be great.' We learned a lot. I learned a lot. I thought I knew a lot about my child."

But something told Sara the ordeal wasn't over. She said, "Three weeks later this man came to our home. [Amy] slipped out...with him. He had continued to contact her, and it wasn't until this meeting that the man assaulted [Amy], in a motel in our own town."

NCMEC contacted the police department who sent a detective to intercept Amy and Bill before they boarded a bus. It wasn't until police approached them in the bus station that Bill told Amy she was not the first girl he'd contacted on the Internet and lured into meeting him in person. This was the turning point for Amy, what she'd needed to hear. Not until then could she tell her mother, "I can't believe I got suckered into this." Bill was convicted and sentenced to a year-and-a-day term in federal prison. Bill was released in April 2001 to the United States Probation Office where he was placed on probation for three years.¹ Sara told us they still get calls with no one at the other end of the line.

We asked Marsha Gilmer-Tullis, who is the NCMEC family services advocate and familiar with Amy's case, why she thought Amy succumbed to this predator — the death of a close step-grandfather, feeling sorry for Bill, adventure-seeking, fears about the new millennium? Marsha said, "All of the above. There are lots of issues, usually. Being a teenager is a very difficult time, and there are

issues and concerns that teens are struggling with. It's often so much easier to get online, where you're anonymous and the other person is anonymous, and talk. You're feeling dejected and unattractive, and someone's telling you how wonderful and beautiful you are. They're a teen and immature, and the adult knows that and takes advantage of it."

It's still difficult for Sara to tell this story. She's doing so, "To keep other families from going through what we went through. [Amy]'s feeling is the same as ours. She wants to help other kids. [Predators] catch [teenagers] at their weakest moment, and they prey on that."

We asked Sara what advice she'd give other parents of online kids. "Know who your kids are with. I would say, watch them when they're online, but you can't always do that. Don't give out any addresses, don't agree to meet anyone, don't believe everything you hear and see — they may be telling you that they're 15, 14, or 12, but they're actually probably 30, 40, or 50 years old.... Don't think that they can't come to your house, because they can! Listen to your feelings. Make sure you know where else your child might be using a computer; at a friend's house, library, or school."

*The names in this article have been changed to protect the privacy of the victim and her family.

¹Kathleen Rice. Assistant United States Attorney for the United States Attorney's Office in Florida. Personal communication, June 24, 2002.