

Cyberstalker enters guilty plea

Satisfaction and relief for victim whose ordeal led to new state law

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By VANESSA HO

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For six years, a stalker tormented Joelle Ligon with cruel, anonymous e-mails. He posed as her in chat rooms, solicited sex and gave out her home and work numbers. He e-mailed her co-workers, using her name, with links to porn sites. He spread vicious lies about her. Yesterday, Ligon finally had the satisfaction of watching her stalker -- her ex-boyfriend -- plead guilty in federal court in Seattle to two counts of online harassment.

Her case spawned a state law earlier this year banning cyberstalking and became the first in the country to be prosecuted under an obscure amendment to federal telecommunications law. James Murphy, a 38-year-old South Carolina resident, originally faced 26 felony counts of Internet harassment, which has a penalty of up to two years in prison and a \$250,000 fine for each count.

Murphy declined to talk to reporters yesterday after his guilty plea. He said in court that he is taking medication for depression. Under a plea agreement with federal prosecutors, Murphy pleaded guilty to two counts in exchange for dismissal of the rest and 36 to 60 months on probation. "I feel good today," Ligon, 36, said after the hearing in U.S. District Court. "I feel a sense of freedom, a sense of victory. It was so good to hear him say, 'Guilty,' to say, 'Yeah, I did it.' "

She first dated Murphy in Utah in 1984, a year after her mother died. She was 15. She broke off the relationship six years later, moved to Virginia, went to college and got married. In 1998, the creepy emails began.

Someone named "Courtney Collide" began sending her e-mails saying such things as, "I know your mother died when you were 14. I know where you went to high school." A year later, "Courtney" sent Ligon e-mails with pornographic images. By 2002, Ligon had moved to Seattle and got a job as a public relations specialist with the Parks Department. The harassing e-mails followed her. Strange men began to call her at work, after Ligon's number was posted in a chat room, with a message saying she wanted sex.

Murphy e-mailed Ligon with a fake name and used her sister's name in the subject line. Two weeks later, he e-mailed Ligon and a group of her co-workers with mean lies, under the guise of a fake group that supposedly enforced an "honor code" for colleges including Ligon's alma mater in Virginia.

He wrote that Ligon may have gotten her job "under false pretenses related to her college degree" and "had a long record of moral turpitude (sic), sexual deviance, drug use and psychological infirmity." The entire time Ligon was stalked, she suspected Murphy and contacted police. Officers said there was nothing they could do. He hadn't physically threatened her, and cyberstalking was not yet outlawed in Washington.

"He was saying, 'I have control of this situation, and you don't have control.' For him, it was like shooting fish in a barrel. I was a big, fat, huge target. I was trapped." But she persevered. She served Murphy with an anti-harassment order, and he e-mailed her a denial from the same computer in South Carolina that he used to stalk her. She lobbied state lawmakers to sponsor a bill to outlaw cyberstalking and testified about her experience. Now in Washington, cyberstalking is a gross misdemeanor punishable by up to one year in prison, a \$5,000 fine or both.

Ligon sought help from the FBI and the U.S. Attorney's Office and endured a difficult, 15-month investigation with them. Twice, assistant U.S. Attorney Kathryn Warma was turned down for a search warrant for Murphy's computer. But Warma researched a little-used 1997 amendment to the Federal Telecommunications Act that outlaws online harassment. She built a case of 26 felony counts against Murphy, stemming from e-mails sent between 2002 and 2003.

She credited her office and Ligon for their resolve. "It took a lot of time and effort and resources," she said. Murphy is scheduled to be sentenced Oct. 29.