

1-24-08 - Retired detective now stalks the mind of a predator

By John Karas, East Hartford Gazette (CT)

Bob Kenary presents his 'The Stranger You Know' course at Sylva's Youth Center.

When it comes to childhood predators, society still has it all wrong, says a veteran East Hartford police detective.

Programs such as "Stranger Danger," and "Good Touch, Bad Touch" are still used by educators, parents and other adults as a method of shielding children from sex predators.

Thousands of kids are signed up for martial arts classes, or are fingerprinted as a means of protecting them. And while there is nothing wrong with such programs, Bob Kenary says the real dangers may lie where they are least expected.

Kenary spent 33 years at the East Hartford Police Department, 15 as commander. In his varied and lengthy career he was in charge of every investigative service the EHPD offered - from juvenile division, major crimes unit, evidentiary services and the narcotics squad.

Typical programs "have made children responsible for their sexual safety," he noted during a presentation Tuesday night at Silva's Youth Center on Silver Lane. "And they teach fear and avoidance, instead of skills and confidence."

Now retired, Kenary has a new role. He goes around the state, thanks to a program put together by East Hartford Child Plan and funded by the Children's Trust Fund, speaking to groups of parents and other adults, espousing his more realistic approach to a touchy and delicate subject.

Kenary's talks go beyond Megan's Law and into the heart and mind of a potential predator. Instead of trying to shift the problem to the kids, he says, parents should inform themselves on how a sex predator operates in order to recognize the dangers, and intervene and save their child.

Kenary told his audience "strengthening the parent's protective instincts and capabilities may be the single best defense against child sexual abuse." That's the message he stressed Tuesday night.

So, how about all these stories in the media, about children abduction's, Megan's laws, sex offender lists, and the like? Kenary, who spent three years of his career with the FBI, graduating from the Bureau's academy at Quantico and working at the Behavioral Sciences unit that deals with sex offenders, said that sexual attacks against children are a big issue in the country. "How big an issue?" he asked.

"Substantiated child abuse cases in the year 2000 were 87,900 cases. That is not a big number - with a country our size. There are 74,000,000 children in the US aged 17 and down. [But] here is the problem: only one to percent to ten percent of these cases are ever reported. They fall by the way side. And one out of seven victims of all sexual assaults, (against [both] adult and children) is under age 6."

That could add up to hundreds of thousands of crimes against children, Kenary observed, with the number of sexual attacks against children reaching probably half a million cases every year. Child abductions are also a very real problem, he confirmed, with over 52,000 cases reported in 2003, the last year we have statistics about. "But here is the rub," the long-time police officer pointed out. "Out of all these abductions, only 47 children were abducted by strangers in the entire U.S.A."

The real problem lurks much nearer to home than we usually realize, Kenary stressed. According to information readily available, 99.9 percent of children who are abused personally know their abuser. And in his 33 year experience at the East Hartford Police Department, he saw only one sexual attack against a minor by a stranger, and that was a groping, he added.

"'Stranger Danger' is sending the wrong message to children," Kenary accused. "It's scaring them, and it's not addressing the problem." So what should a parent do? The answer is to learn to recognize the sex predators that target their kids, so that they don't have access to them. Hence, the "Stranger you know," title of his lecture.

Kenary said that there are two types of sexual offenders against kids.

First there is the pedophile - a term the media has muddled, by using it to describe every sex offender, but which in reality applies only to the person who habitually targets pre-pubescent boys. He - and is always a "He" Kenary said, has high self

esteem, is an extrovert, is often well educated, respected in community, and may be married. He has also a Peter Pan syndrome, acting often like a child, and has child lures like games, videos, and skateboards to attract his victims. He offers kids presents, "understanding," and "respect," and he is always allowed to approach his victim by its own parents, who never imagine what he is really after.

"He is Mr. Nice Guy," Kenary stressed, "but in his case 'Nice' is not a character trait, it's a tool."

While statistics show that pedophiles are very few, he said, pedophiles commit an inordinate number of crimes each, most of them attacking more than 100 kids before they are caught. And they are well organized, with international networks connecting them together, and even organizations promoting their "rights," like NAMBLA - the North American Man Boy Love Association.

Recently the Internet has been a great attraction to these people, because they can easily find children whose parents are not aware of what is happening, Kenary said. They approach them by offering them the sense that they are nearer their interests, that they understand them better.

"And you know what is the first present they send the kids?" Kenary asked. "A web camera."

There have also been questions if pedophiles are attracted in professions that give them power over children - teachers, boy scout leaders, priests - Kenary pointed out, and while there are no specific studies on this, it should be something parents should always be aware of.

"Is every teacher, Boy Scout leaders and priest a pedophile?" Kenary asked. "No. But a parent must keep in mind that one could be." And then there is the second group of sexual offenders against children, the regressed offender, the sexual predator that attacks children opportunistically, Kenary related. Generally under-adequate, from a dysfunctional home, inhibited, with low self esteem, no sense of self or identity, with little education and possibly intellectual deficits, this offender will try anything sexual, and mostly offends against girls. The crime is usually committed on impulse, inside the family, when the other partner is away, and often involve alcohol. And he always tries to deny the facts, sometimes blaming the attack on his victim. "Talk with your children, open lines of communication about sexual safety, talk to them about these people," Kenary pleaded with his audience.

He has been trying to promote this message for the last 9 years, he said after the event, starting lecturing on the subject in 1999 and going on to develop the program he is now presenting with Child Plan in East Hartford two years ago. He has talked about the problem in dozens of events around the state, till now, and has even written a book that will be soon published by the state.

What keeps him going? Parents in the audience, he answers. "They really understand," he said. "I can see it in their faces instantly. 'Why didn't anybody tell us this before?' they say. And I have also had victims that have been in audiences that said, 'I wish I knew this before, and none of this would ever have happened to me.'"

And by the reaction of his audience, it was obvious he made an impact. Mothers and father voiced strongly their thoughts during the presentation, some more graphically than others. And by the end of it, it was clear the message had gone through.

"It was very informative," East Hartford mom Suzean Langanshe said afterward. "I found a lot that I didn't know - about the Nice Guy, and the gifts, and how someone like that may try to sneak in the family."

Another parent, Leomie White, agreed. "Everything was quite clear about the way these people act," she said. "We put a lot of emphasis on how the children act. We should be acting ourselves."