

Sunday, September 3, 2006 - 12:00 AM

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Nicole Brodeur

Stalking victim uncovers dark use of technology

Sherry Peak wants you to know her name, to look at her picture. So do it. It just may save her life.

Peak, 36, lives in Kirkland and is the mother of two daughters. For 10 years, she was married to a man who controlled her when they were together, then stalked her when they broke up. Not just with phone calls. Not just with unannounced visits to her home and office.

Robert Peak, 46, embedded himself into his estranged wife's very existence by hiding a GPS system in the dashboard of her Toyota Land Cruiser. Beside it, he installed a cellphone that didn't ring, but still picked up when he called. He could hear every conversation she had in the vehicle. He also installed spyware on her computer so he could hack into her e-mail.

Imagine. A trip to any electronics store, a couple hours under the dash, and Robert Peak knew where Sherry Peak was going, for how long, and with whom. He knew her friends' phone numbers and addresses. He would show up in restaurants, at her office, at friends' homes.

Technology has eased our lives with hums and clicks. It has connected us across oceans and time zones. But it also can advance the obsessive pursuits of the spurned and sick.

"The phenomenon of stalking isn't new, it's just that the technology gets better," said Dr. Mark Levy, a forensic psychiatrist and assistant professor at the University of California, San Francisco, School of Medicine. "It's like aggression. We don't throw stones anymore. We use cluster bombs."

Sherry Peak couldn't get people to believe that she was seeing her estranged husband behind her on the road, in parking lots. She remembered telling a friend she was going to report him to police for violating a restraining order, and Robert Peak (hearing her on her cellphone) beating her to it, calling police to say it was nothing.

In February, after months of harassment, Sherry Peak talked with Bellevue Police Detective Elizabeth Faith and Lt. Jim Jolliffe.

"There were just too many coincidences," Jolliffe said of Peak's stories. He had Peak bring her vehicle in to the city shop, where he used fiber-optic scopes to check "everything." After two hours, Jolliffe was ready to quit. Then he thought to pop off the dashboard cover.

"We found the GPS and the cellphone right at the end," Jolliffe said. "It was like, 'Wow, she was



KEN LAMBERT / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Sherry Peak was stalked by her estranged husband, who hid a cellphone and GPS system in her vehicle to monitor her whereabouts.

right.' "

Sherri Peak fell apart at the discovery — not just with relief, but with realizing how thorough her estranged husband's invasion had been.

"This guy had me completely wired in. He knew everything at every moment."

On Aug. 14, Robert Peak pleaded guilty to felony stalking, and was sentenced to eight months in King County Jail and four months of work release. He was given credit for 152 days, so he will be out in a few months.

Sherri Peak is using his time behind bars to talk about her experience, here and on a national television talk show. She wants other victims and law enforcement to know the darker uses of technology.

"I was the sacrificial lamb at some point, and now I'm the messenger," she said. "Because my story was so crazy, people had a hard time grasping it."

In 1990, California became the first of 50 states to establish anti-stalking laws, following the stalking and murder of actress Rebecca Schaeffer. But even the folks at the Los Angeles Police Department had never heard of a case like Peak's.

"Never," said Officer Martha Garcia, speaking for the department's Threat Management Unit. She then warned me against writing details of what Robert Peak had done.

"It might give people ideas," she said.

But Sherri Peak won't be swayed to silence. She believes other stalkers right now are using the same technology.

It's hard to argue, when you look at the numbers. More than a million women and 370,000 men are stalked annually in the U.S., according to the National Center for Victims of Crime. Some 80 percent of cases involve women stalked by ex-boyfriends and former husbands.

More than half of female murder victims had reported stalking to police before being killed by their stalkers, according to the center.

Sherri Peak still can see Robert Peak looking back at her as he left the courtroom in handcuffs last month.

"It was like, 'Look what you've done,' " she said. "So I had to do this, to speak out. So when I'm gone ... "

Know her name, look at her picture. Watch out for her.

Nicole Brodeur's column appears Wednesday and Sunday.

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And she will keep an eye on him.