

Don't fall for this romantic entanglement

'Sweetheart scams' on the rise

By Sophie Braccini



"Beverly" in Orinda today
Photo Sophie Braccini

An Orinda resident, whom we will call Beverly to protect her privacy, recently lost all her money to someone she met online, becoming victim to an ever-increasing and disturbing trend: the sweetheart scam. She not only faces a very difficult financial situation, but the ridicule by some for what they see as extreme naivety. But Beverly is not alone as an internet scam victim. In 2016 the FBI recorded 14,546 cases of confidence fraud/romance in the U.S. for an estimated loss of \$219,807,760.

Today, at almost 70, Beverly is looking for a job and a place to live.

The Orinda resident had been divorced for five years and lived in Orinda with enough financial resources to envision a peaceful retirement, but the prospect of being alone was, and still is, distressful.

A sophisticated and intelligent woman, Beverly is a self-described artist. Her loneliness pushed her to create a profile on Match.com where she met "Jack." FBI experts explain that online predators hack into dormant online accounts and impersonate real people, something that internet service providers have a hard time identifying.

Even today, Beverly has difficulty recognizing the warning signs that should have alerted her. To her, Jack was exactly what she had been dreaming of: a sophisticated man of the world, who loved art and could recite an entire poem when she started quoting one. The FBI agent that the Orinda police referred her to explained that the man was likely a whole group of probably 20 to 30 people, working together, doing internet research and writing the emails and poems she received, even though she only met one person.

The man said he was a German citizen who worked in the fashion fabrics industry and constantly traveled. The job details he gave Beverly, she says, were very realistic and she never doubted that he was who he said he was.

FBI reports on sweetheart scams reveal tactics that "Jack" used, such as planning a weekend

in Paris or Rome and canceling at the last minute. Beverly says that the romance went on and off for months as he canceled appointments, then regained her attention online before finally meeting her in New York. She would not share how many times she met Jack in person, in New-York or in Orinda, but she remembers how sophisticated and classy he looked and behaved.

Once he completely gained her trust he offered to open a joint account with her, explaining that her financial advisor was not getting her enough return for the money he managed and that a joint account would allow him to give her the benefit of his multi-million-dollar operations. She trusted him and transferred all her money to the joint account. But that was not all.

Jack suggested that he and Beverly move in together to a home in Sausalito. He asked her to look for a property "costing no more than \$10 million" and that he would take care of it. He asked that as a token of her commitment, she sell her Orinda residence and invest the money in the house. She did and confidently wired the money to the Ukrainian account he gave her.

The wire set off banking system bells and whistles, and the Orinda police and the FBI contacted Beverly, who reassured them that all was well. She even dismissed friends who tried to warn her.

On the day the two had set, she vacated the sold residence, put all her belongings in storage and took her pets with her to a Sausalito hotel. The next morning, with a beating heart and still no doubts, she arrived at the house that had been chosen. Jack never showed up, no real estate agent could be found, and after a few hours of trying unsuccessfully to reach someone she finally realized the scope of the disaster.

Today she lives at a friend's house, but she will soon have to leave. She is selling her furniture and art through an auction house, and is looking for a job. The FBI agent she worked with told her that there was no way to trace her money. All is gone to countries like Nigeria where it cannot be retrieved. All the agency can do is provide her with a letter for the IRS so she does not have to pay taxes next year.

According to the FBI's Internet Crime Complaint Center, online romance crime is on the rise because it is very easy to pretend to be anybody you want. Favorite targets are women between ages 50 and 70. Scams targeting men are also on the rise. Anyone interested in helping Beverly can send an email to this newspaper.

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FBI tips to avoid romance fraud

If you develop a romantic relationship with someone you meet online, consider the following:

- Research the person's photo and profile using online searches to see if the material has been used elsewhere.
- Go slow and ask lots of questions.
- Beware if the individual seems too perfect or quickly asks you to leave a dating service or Facebook to go "offline."
- Beware if the individual attempts to isolate you from friends and family or requests inappropriate photos or financial information that could later be used to extort you.
- Beware if the individual promises to meet in person but then frequently comes up with an excuse why he or she can't. If you haven't met the person after a few months, for whatever reason, you have good reason to be suspicious.
- Never send money to anyone you don't know personally.

If you suspect an online relationship is a scam, stop all contact immediately. And if you are the victim of a romance scam, file a complaint with the FBI's Internet Crime Complaint Center.

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