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WALK LIKE AN EGYPTIAN: C-I theatre takes audiences back to time of pharaohs. PAGE 21



Bluejacket head football coach Shane Weibel proudly holds up the Section 7AAAAA championship trophy as the players break into their traditional post-victory rendition of the school song after the Jackets beat Andover 34-20 on Friday, Nov. 2. The Jackets will face Bemidji in their first state tournament appearance since 2005 at 8 p.m. on Saturday, Nov. 10, at St. Cloud State University.



Members of the North Branch volleyball team's bench rush out to join their teammates in celebrating their second-straight Section 7AA championship after the Vikings defeated Greenway 3-1 on Saturday, Nov. 3, in Cloquet. North Branch was given the #4 seed for the state tournament, which runs from Thursday, Nov. 8, through Saturday, Nov. 10, at Xcel Energy Center in St. Paul. The Vikings will face Watertown-Mayer in the quarterfinals at 5 p.m. on Thursday, Nov. 8.

Voters elect three new mayors

BY BILL STICKELS III
EDITOR@COUNTYSTAR.COM

Right after the election filings and primary election, it was a given that two of the area cities – Cambridge and North Branch – were going to have new mayors in 2019. But on election night, it became an official “triple play” as Isanti mayor George Wimmer lost his bid for re-election to Jeff Johnson.

In what was at times a contentious race, at least on social media, Wimmer received 996 votes (44.95 percent), over 200 fewer than Johnson’s 1,214 (54.78 percent).

The voting results in both Cambridge and North Branch were virtually identical to each other, with a sitting

council member winning the mayor’s race.

In Cambridge, Jim Godfrey (1,663 votes, 50.93 percent) edged out Mike Stylski (1,589 votes, 48.67 percent). The margin of victory was somewhat larger in North Branch, with Jim Swenson (2,181 votes, 56.39 percent) defeating Robert Canada (1,660 votes, 42.92 percent) by just over 500 votes.

This means that, come the first meeting in January, there will be a vacated council seat in both cities that will be filled by the new councils via appointment. According to both Cambridge city administrator Lynda Woulfe and North Branch city administrator Renae Fry, the current council



Jeff Johnson



Jim Godfrey



Jim Swenson

SEE ELECTION, PAGE 2

‘Predator Hunters’ video leads to criminal charges

BY JENNIFER KOTILA
NEWS@PINECITYMN.COM

Young people are told not to set up meetings with unknown people they meet online, but a local vigilante is making some adults likely wish they’d followed that advice.

Randy Lee McCray, of Isanti, who has been charged in Pine County with three felonies related to soliciting a child to engage in sexual conduct, was exposed by “Josh” and his team, Predator Hunters USA – a vigilante team based out of Forest Lake whose mission is to expose sexual predators.

The group sets up fake profiles on dating websites to attract predators of underage girls and boys. Once

a relationship is established and a meeting place is set, the Predator Hunters video-record the encounter and turn over information to local law enforcement for prosecution.

“I just want a safer world for the children of the present and future. My whole team has this passion,” said founder Josh of what inspired him and the team to begin doing this type of work about a month ago. Last names of team members are not being used due to safety precautions.

All of the busts conducted by Predator Hunters USA are streamed live on the team’s Facebook page. Following an exposure, Predator Hunters USA posts a photo of the predator with their first name and city of residence.

Although the team is actively

SEE PREDATOR, PAGE 5



McCray

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PREDATOR: Some law enforcement entities not supportive, concern for safety cited

FROM PAGE I

exposing predators that are preying on underage girls and boys, Josh noted the team does “not wish any type of harm on these predators, and we ask the public not to be harassing these predators or their families in any way.”

Thus far, about 27 predators have been exposed, according to Josh. The Facebook page has gained more than 20,000 followers and more than 18,000 likes since it began Oct. 7.

The Predator Hunters USA team consists of Josh, about nine administrators, and about 19 decoys at this time.

“They are all wonderful volunteers who put in a lot of time and sacrifice,” Josh said. Most of the volunteers work full-time jobs along with volunteering for Predator Hunters USA.

HOW THE OPERATION WORKS

Team administrators provide basic upkeep of the Facebook page, responding to messages and comments, as well as helping the decoys.

Administrators also send law enforcement all the evidence collected regarding a predator and their communications with the decoys.

Decoys set up fake profiles on dating apps in order to attract predators. However, they do not seek out anyone, start conversations or initiate any type of sexual conversation or meeting, according to Josh.

Decoys and administrators receive training about the process that must be followed and how things have to be done in order not to jeopardize possible future arrests or prosecutions of the predators.

“Decoys make their age known and tell these predators they do not have to keep talking to them due to their age,” Josh said. “These predators are given many outs when it comes to continuing to talk and meet up with these under-

‘I always tell people that if I get hurt or die doing this, that is fine. I would rather it be me than a child.’

Josh (Last name withheld)
Founder of Predator Hunters USA

age decoys.”

Following an exposure, the team turns over the chat logs from the dating apps, as well as the Facebook live video taken at the time of exposure, according to Laura. If any arrests are made due to exposures by Predator Hunters USA, the team posts the arrest and charges on the Facebook page.

The team did not want to disclose the dating apps being used or additional information regarding exposures because they do not want predators to catch on to how the team is conducting its work, according to administrator Laura.

“Our advice for those asking (about the dating apps the predators are on) is to check their child’s phone for any dating app or apps that can be used to chat,” Laura said. “(Predators) use any and all sites. Please just monitor your child’s phone. These predators have no limit to what they will use.”

GOAL IS PROSECUTION OF PREDATORS

Although McCray is the only predator to be arrested at this point in time, there are other investigations taking place in communities where Predator Hunters USA has exposed predators. Josh could not release further information regarding other investigations, because the team does not want to interfere with the law enforcement investigation or possible charges.



CONTRIBUTED

Josh, founder of Predator Hunters USA, has been engaging with online sexual predators for just over a month with positive results.

While the team wants to fully cooperate with law enforcement and prosecution, Josh noted that some agencies have been “super” supportive, and others not as supportive. However, Josh said he believes those not as supportive are more concerned about the team’s safety.

Recently, some law enforcement agencies have been telling the team what types of evidence will be needed in

order to arrest, prosecute and convict predators.

“Instead of just exposing these predators, we want to try to get them all convicted,” Josh said.

Law enforcement has taken statements from decoys in some of the cases, and, if a case is prosecuted, decoys, administrators and Josh may have to testify in court regarding their roles in exposing the predators.

“We are all willing to cooperate,” Josh said. “Anyone on my team who would need to testify will. They are all aware of the risks that come along with this. I have a great, dedicated team who share my passion in this. We just want a safer world for the children of today and the future.”

The work that Josh and his team takes part in is dangerous. They are not dealing with harmless, law-abiding individuals. Predators may have more sinister crimes in mind, like murder. When asked what safety precautions are taken, aside from conducting exposures on Facebook live, Josh explained he tries to have a second person with him for backup. He also has his permit to carry.

“I always tell people that if I get hurt or die doing this, that is fine,” he said. “I would rather it be me than a child. My family knows the risks of what I am doing. They are very supportive.”

In order to equip and fund the team’s efforts, Predator Hunters USA solicits gas cards, phones, old tablets and monetary donations on its Facebook page. It also sells T-shirts, bracelets, sweat-shirts and decals.

Predator Hunters USA is hosting a team meet and greet Saturday, Nov. 17, from 3:30 to 4:30 p.m. at Forest Lake American Legion, 355 West Broadway Avenue.

Isanti predator turns self in to Pine County Sheriff

BY MIKE GAINOR
EDITOR@PINECITYMN.COM

Randy Lee McCray, 53, of Isanti, has been charged with two felony counts of soliciting a child to engage in sexual conduct after McCray allegedly admitted coming to Pine City’s Robinson Park and attempting to meet what he thought was a 15-year-old female for sex.

According to the criminal complaint filed in Pine County Court, on Oct. 29 deputies received a report that Predator Hunters USA had conducted a sting operation using a decoy to pose as a minor to discover adults who solicit minors.

According to the report, between Oct. 27-29 a volunteer decoy using a dating application told a male she was communicating with that she was actually a 15-year-old female in 10th grade.

In the electronic messages, the decoy asks if it “does not really bother him that she is only 15 years old,” and the male replies “Yes, a little.” However, according to the messages, the male then sent her explicit sexual messages and requested nude photos.

The two made plans to meet in Pine City’s Robinson Park. On that day, a male from Predator Hunters USA went to the park and, while live-streaming video, found McCray in the pa-

‘It’s a tough one, especially when you throw out there the potential child abuse or younger people being involved. It’s hard to come out and say, ‘Absolutely don’t do that (to predator hunters).’

Jeff Nelson
Pine County Sheriff

vilion. The two men spoke on the video, and McCray admitted texting the decoy.

This video was immediately available on the Predator Hunters USA page on Facebook, where it received a great deal of attention from concerned community members.

The Pine County Sheriff’s Office reports that on Oct. 31, McCray contacted them. McCray told them he had been “scammed.” He admitted to using a dating application, beginning on Oct. 27 to message a person he claimed was a 25-year-old female named “Briana Rose,” who subsequently informed him she was 15 years old.

McCray then came to the Pine County Sheriff’s Office on Nov. 1 and provided a statement to investigators following the Miranda warning.

According to that statement, McCray again admitted he had

been told the female he was text messaging was 15, admitted texting the decoy about sexual conduct and admitted he went to Robinson Park to meet with the person he thought was a 15-year-old female. He stated he “knows he messed up.”

McCray was arrested. He now faces a maximum sentence of three years, a \$5,000 fine or both.

PROBABLE CAUSE ISSUED

Pine County Sheriff Jeff Nelson said that, even before McCray came to be interviewed in the Pine County Sheriff’s Office, Pine County officers had issued a PC (probable cause) to detain based on the information they had already received.

“It’s not a warrant from the courts,” Nelson explained. “It’s an officer saying, ‘I’ve got enough reason to have this person arrested. If you

have contact with him, please arrest him for me.’ So that was already in place.

“We’ll do that locally with people that we deal with (when) there’s enough probable cause to detain through law enforcement,” he continued. “Then we’ll say, ‘Yes, we have enough reason to arrest them.’ We’ll provide the documentation and then ask someone to go look for them. It doesn’t carry the same weight as a warrant, because that is through the courts, but we can rely on other officers.”

However, instead of deputies going out to find McCray, McCray came into the sheriff’s office voluntarily, gave his statement and was arrested.

PREDATOR HUNTERS A SURPRISE

Nelson said he did not know about Predator Hunters USA until the McCray video came out, but said he had concerns about volunteer groups taking the law into their own hands.

“I’m conflicted on it, because we also look at it from the point of safety,” he said. “Somebody’s putting themselves into a situation. The more attention that gets – you hope people will stop doing that activity – but it also might heighten their response or their preparation for a confrontation: carrying weapons or putting up a fight, or doing more than just running away. That’s what concerns me, and

I’m assuming most of law enforcement sees those concerns too. It’s a tough situation.”

He said that it could prove difficult to use information provided by a volunteer to prosecute a criminal case against a predator.

“There’s entrapment; there’s stuff before we get the information which we cannot control, which may or may not make it prosecutable,” Nelson said. “If they stretch things ... and we rely on that information, when it starts going to court and we see that there’s gaps or there’s holes or concerns we can potentially put a lot of effort into a case that has no chance of being prosecuted.”

Though he could not state that he supported groups like Predator Hunters USA, Nelson admitted that law enforcement had limited resources to try to track down predators, and that the group’s work could keep children from coming to harm.

“It’s a tough one, especially when you throw out there the potential child abuse or younger people being involved,” Nelson said. “It’s hard to come out and say, ‘Absolutely don’t do that,’ and then at the same time thinking, ‘Well, that might mean there’s something happening to a younger child that could have been prevented.’”



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