



Former judge goes undercover at night on Web to hunt terrorists

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<http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2007/07/19/america/NA-GEN-US-Terrorist-Hunter.php>

SCRANTON, Pennsylvania: Shannen Rossmiller is not a terrorist. She just plays one on the Internet.

In the early hours of the morning, while her family sleeps, the former judge goes online and assumes the identity of a Muslim extremist — the better to strike up conversations with actual terrorists and, she hopes, ferret out their plans to harm the United States and its allies.

Then the 38-year-old former Miss Congeniality and married mother of three feeds the intelligence she gathers to the FBI.

Her work as a volunteer terrorist hunter has brought down three suspects in the United States so far, including Michael Reynolds, an unemployed ex-convict found guilty in federal court last week of offering to help al-Qaida blow up U.S. pipelines and refineries.

Reynolds thought he was conversing with an al-Qaida financier named Hamza Ali Osman. His contact turned out to be Rossmiller — a judge for six years before accepting a job last September with the attorney general of Montana.

"Little people like me can make a difference if they just look inside and see what they can offer," Rossmiller told The Associated Press in an interview.

She has been classified as an official FBI intelligence asset for the past three years. Her FBI handler, Mark Seyler, testified during the Reynolds trial about her credibility.

"To her credit, she's very humble about her role and she should be recognized for the integral role she played in this case and in other cases," said Tim Fuhrman, who heads the FBI's Salt Lake City office.

Most of Rossmiller's work has focused on overseas suspects. By her count, she has handed over to the FBI more than 200 "packets" of information on terrorism trends and potential suspects, and at least eight people have been arrested, she said.

She draws no salary and says she does not want one. The FBI has reimbursed her about \$30,000 in out-of-pocket expenses, but she said she has spent far more than that on her terrorist hunting.

"Being a judge, I saw paid informants all the time, and I did not want that label on me. It's not about money," she said. "It's about doing what's right because I can."

Rossmiller's journey from private citizen to counterterrorism cybersleuth began on Sept. 11, 2001. Like many others, she was transfixed and horrified by the TV images of the terrorist attacks. That night, she fell in the shower and broke her pelvis; laid up for five weeks, she could not escape the news coverage.

"I was so angry and affected. I had a profound change happen to me," Rossmiller said.

She dove into books about Islam and Islamic extremism. One night, she saw a news report about a Web site favored by extremists and decided to log on. The site was in Arabic, which she did not understand. So she bought some translation software, then taught herself the language.

Rossmiller created her first online identity in March 2002, posing as an angry Middle Eastern male. All of the 30 identities she has assumed since then have been variations on that theme. Her characters spout anti-American rhetoric, e-mail beheading videos and exhort fellow extremists to be cautious in what they say on public Internet forums.

It is all about gaining the extremists' trust. "You always have to give the impression that what you're saying is real," she said. "That takes a lot of time."

Rossmiller's first domestic success involved Spc. Ryan Anderson, a Muslim convert and National Guardsman who was convicted in military court of trying to give information on U.S. troop strength and tactics to al-Qaida.

She came across Anderson while monitoring an extremist Web site in 2003. After seeing a message from a man calling himself Amir Abdul Rashid, she posted a phony call to jihad against the United States. Rashid wrote back, saying he was "curious if a brother fighting on the wrong side could join or defect."

Rashid, it turned out, was Spc. Anderson, and Rossmiller gave his name to authorities. Anderson was arrested in 2004 after he met with undercover agents and offered information on how to kill U.S. troops in Iraq.

Rossmiller's terrorist hunting might never have been exposed had it not been for the Anderson case. Called as a witness, she fought hard to keep her identity a secret. But Anderson's right to confront his accuser won out.

The FBI, the Border Patrol and local police now regularly check on her safety, and her home is equipped with surveillance cameras. She uses a program that masks her computer's Internet Protocol address, making it seem as if she was logging on from the Middle East, not Montana. She also carries a .38-caliber pistol for protection.

Roger Cressey, a former counterterrorism official in the Clinton and Bush administrations, said the FBI and CIA recognize the importance of Internet surveillance but lack the resources to process the staggering amount of data available — making someone like Rossmiller a valuable tool.

She is "an extreme version of the vigilance argument, that we all must be vigilant about what we see and hear," Cressey said. "There's a difference between vigilance and vigilantism, and as long as she's staying on the vigilance side of the line, I think that's appropriate and useful."

On the Net: <http://www.shannenrossmiller.com>