



Web-based terrorist hunter to teach

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Shannen Rossmiller, a former Montana judge whose late-night hunts for al-Qaeda on the Web led to the two largest terror convictions in U.S. history, announced yesterday that she would begin teaching others her arcane and dangerous craft.

At the first FBI-sponsored International Conference on Cyber Security, held at Fordham University in New York City, Rossmiller, 39, said she planned to team with an as-yet-unnamed defense contractor to form a "cyber corps" of intelligence experts who will search out terrorists on the Internet.

"Everybody finally understands what the terrorists have known since 9/11," said Rossmiller, an FBI counter-intelligence asset. "With just a few thousand dollars and the Web, terrorists can be more efficient than our own government. And we have to do something about that."

After the Sept. 11 attacks, Rossmiller taught herself Arabic and created around 30 fictitious Muslim personas bent on jihad. She used those characters online to ensnare Islamic extremists lurking on Web sites such as Osama bin Laden Crew, where ideas were exchanged on how to harm the United States.

Despite death threats and deteriorating health, which she attributes to the stress of hunting terrorists, Rossmiller, a mother of three, pressed on with her work.

It led to the arrest and conviction in July 2007 of Michael Curtis Reynolds, a Wilkes-Barre drifter who once tried to incinerate his parents. He had gone online looking for al-Qaeda funding to blow up the trans-Alaska and transcontinental pipelines because he opposed the Iraq war.

Duped by Rossmiller into thinking he was communicating with a jihadist named Hani, Reynolds revealed his plan. He is serving a 30-year sentence for trying to provide material support to al-Qaeda.

Similarly, Rossmiller's Internet sleuthing uncovered the treason of National Guard tank Spec. Ryan Anderson of the 81st Armor Brigade at Fort Lewis in Washington state. About to be sent to Iraq, Anderson, who had grown disenchanted with America, wanted to sell U.S. tank secrets to al-Qaeda to help kill U.S. soldiers.

He entrusted his secret to a man on the Web named Khadija - in reality, Rossmiller - in November 2003. That led to Anderson's court-martial and life imprisonment.

The story of how Rossmiller exposed Reynolds and Anderson was reported in The Inquirer in July 2007.

It was the Reynolds trial - and the crushing responsibility of making the prosecution's case - that finally persuaded Rossmiller to become less active as an antiterror operative and to turn to teaching.

"I was vomiting blood before I had to testify in [Scranton federal] court against Reynolds," Rossmiller said. "I developed kidney stones and a bleeding ulcer. It takes you down. I thought it was going to be the end of me."

Rossmiller said she still draws out jihadists on the Web, then informs the FBI. This makes her the only known private U.S. citizen who has successfully brought about arrests and convictions of terrorists, law enforcement officials say.

Her associates say she has provided intelligence in 214 classified international espionage and terrorism cases. But Rossmiller said she would never again get so intimately involved in a case that she becomes part of the chain of evidence and is compelled to testify in an open court.

"There are a lot of people who can be trained to do what I do," Rossmiller said. "I don't want the notoriety or the pressure. I can teach people who will be paid professionals, not volunteers like me."

In her more than eight years of cyber-spying, Rossmiller said, she has not accepted a dime of compensation, except for travel reimbursement from the FBI.

Despite her years of work and the documented threats against her life, the FBI does not publicly laud her contributions.

"At this time, we are not willing to go beyond giving Ms. Rossmiller credit for what she did in cases in open court," FBI Agent Juan Becerra said yesterday from the Salt Lake City office to which Rossmiller has reported.

Off the record, however, agents have praised Rossmiller for her prowess - unparalleled, they say, among even the most veteran federal operatives, many of whom did not have access to the Internet in FBI offices even after Sept. 11.

So turning to teaching makes sense, her associates say. Rossmiller has been encouraged in this effort by James Woolsey, director of the CIA from 1993 to 1995.

"A year ago December, I talked to Shannen about the need for her to multiply her methodologies," Woolsey wrote in an e-mailed statement yesterday. "She has since met with multiple defense companies and intelligence agencies about finding a way to do just that. Her idea about the cyber corps is, I think, a good way for her to go."

Organizers of this week's 37-nation conference at Fordham - which includes representatives from the U.S. Department of Justice and the National Security Agency, as well as corporations such as Microsoft and Google - lavished praise on Rossmiller.

"I don't think anybody else like Shannen Rossmiller exists," said Bob Howe, a Fordham spokesman. "Hers is a unique case."