

Private eye tracks down success for herself

By Sharon Dargay
staff writer

Beverly Debski doesn't look any different from most professional working women. That's the key to her success on the job. No one would suspect that the attractive, 35-year-old Troy woman spends hours at a stretch, holed up in her car with binoculars and camera. Nor that she has masqueraded as everything from a factory worker to a society matron in order to pump unsuspecting informants for information. Nor that the tools of her trade include "tracer" bugs, tape recorder and gun. "It's not like TV," insisted the owner of S.P.I.E.S. Unlimited, a Troy private investigation firm. "I spend a lot of time in cars. "I remember 'Magnum P.I.' getting into a helicopter (on television). Here I was with my binoculars, thermos of coffee and blanket, climbing in my car for 12 hours. "If you're going to be a private investigator you've got to have patience. You have to sit for 12 hours sometimes without going to the bathroom. I spend a lot of time sitting and waiting for 30 seconds of action. "You have to be different to be a private investigator. You have to be able to act instantly, be able to be persistent and if something's not working, to try another way." Debski, founder of Female Private Investigators International (FPI), a networking and support group for licensed female private eyes, traded her mixer for a pistol a few years ago. Today the former housewife pumps iron instead of pressing with it.

She started working toward a bachelor's degree in law enforcement at age 27, after 11 years as a housemaker and mother, and currently is studying for her master's in sociology and criminal justice at Oakland University. She is licensed by the state to practice investigation. "Espionage and crowd control are a lot more interesting than accounting 101," she explained her career choice. "I was too old when I graduated to be a police officer. My only alternative was to open a business." She combed the Yellow Pages for business name ideas, settling on the acronym for surveillance, private investigation, electronic security. She placed advertisements in women's business directories, hired three employees — two women and a man — and set her fees below the average \$35 per hour rate. She also wanted to meet other licensed female private investigators. "There are only 33 of us (in Michigan). I threw a catered brunch at a hotel in downtown Birmingham and about half of them showed up. Some of them have 30 to 40 years experience." The expense and effort were worth the result. "In this business you are who you know," she explained. "There is camaraderie between male and female private investigators, but when I sit down with a another woman, we share something (special) in common." Members build new friendships, advise one another with job problems and sometimes share investigation on equipment and information sources. Some times the women share horror stories about the hazards of the job — being beaten, shot or taken hostage. "The little years keep Debski on her toes. "Apprentension is a good thing," she noted. "Because the bottom line is I have to be able to do the next case."

SHE STAYS in shape by lifting weights and through monthly target practice. At annual state police seminars on investigation techniques and equipment, Debski, jokingly asks for "poison lipstick and rockets for my Austin Martin." "All they can offer is a burglar alarm system," she laughed. "We don't use poison lipstick or rockets. You've got to join the CIA for those things." But more often than not, it's wit — not sophisticated equipment — that cracks a case. And although some lawyers first regard Debski with an "aw gee, isn't that cute," attitude, her work earns her respect. She suspects women are more adept at procuring information than are their male counterparts. "A 6-foot-6 mountain come to the door and you know (he's a private eye). But if I come in . . ."

Her 17-year-old daughter sometimes accompanies her on cases, helping to build a perfectly innocent-looking cover. She's also less likely than a male colleague to use brawn on the job. "I found kicking in doors to be hard on my nylons, so I ring the doorknob." While tracking errant spouses and uncovering corporate fraud, she seems more like an actor with incredible "chitpah" than a sleuthing Nancy Drew. HER FIRST CASE took her into a foggy graveyard in the dead of night. She hid behind two bushes in the eerie cemetery, waiting to photograph a van. "I'm in danger all of the time. The worst thing would be to become complacent in this job."

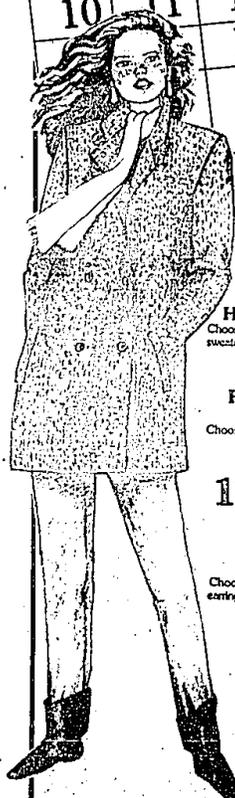
"If you're going to be a private investigator, you've got to have patience. You have to sit for 12 hours sometimes without going to the bathroom."
— Beverly Debski

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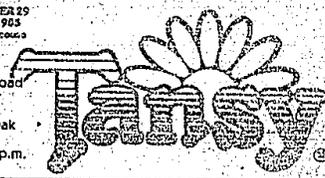
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