

Undercover

How private eyes sniff out criminals

By CRAIG PIECHURA

Call them dicks. Private eyes. Gumshoes. Snoopers.

Private investigators like the crew at Bell Investigations of Southfield don't care what people call them as long as they pay. Half of the fee up front, 25 cents per mile if they use a car, plus expenses such as movie tickets when a surveillance target ducks into a theater.

It's exciting undercover work. But, unlike any Ramond Chandler novel, few private eyes ever get into the cloak and dagger business of solving murders or cracking big criminal conspiracies.

"That's police work," explains Leonard Rancilio, 28, one of the private eyes at Bell. "Few (private investigators) do. Anyone who tells you different is probably BS'ing you. That's police work — anything that's criminal."

PRIVATE INVESTIGATORS concentrate on cases such as child custody matters, tracking down missing persons, and performing the unglamorous detail of checking to see if someone's cheating on their spouse.

A sign of the times, investigators say, is an increase of clients who pay private investigators to track down sons or daughters who've joined a religious cult.

Private eyes say they must work within the law to satisfy their client's request but admit that for the fee they obtain information laymen would be prohibited from obtaining. For example, people are often traced by private eyes through Social Security numbers, information which is supposed to be confidential.

TAKING A Krishna member unwillingly away from his ashram or picking up a child caught in the middle of a custody dispute could be called kidnapping. Because "the law is in a gray area," on such matters, Rancilio explains that Bell investigators will locate the subjects for their clients but let the parent make the actual "snatch."

Private investigators at Bell were asked about the ethics of participating in a scheme to "snatch" a child for a divorced parent. Investigators explained that as a hired gun, they must

divorce themselves from any emotional involvement in the cases.

But, before accepting a child custody case, clients must prove a court has named them legal guardian. Trouble is, Rancilio says, is that often one parent has custody in one state and the other has custody in another state.

"**WE GOT** a kid from Michigan," said Michael Rancilio, 27 of Southfield. (The mother) had legal custody here. He had custody in Texas. He grabbed (the 7-year-old girl) and whisked her away. She has the kid now. Yeah, you gotta wonder what's going on with that kid." At the request of the girl's father, Rancilio and his partners located the child, observed her habits from afar, and set up a match of the girl as she played on the front lawn of her grandparent's house. The girl's mother was at work.

"He went up to the house, walked to her, said 'I'm your father,'" Rancilio said. "She said something like 'I'm sorry I've been waiting for you.' She was only 7 years old. She seemed happy to be with him. She grabbed him by the hand and they walked to the car down the street and jumped in with him."

Investigators located the girl's mother to tell them her husband had taken custody of their daughter.

It wasn't too long, though, before private investigators working for the mother stormed into a schoolroom in Texas where the girl was enrolled and took her away to be flown back to Michigan with her father.

Rancilio figures it's the job of the court and the couple — not the private

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— Leonard Rancilio

investigators — to decide who's right in such a dispute.

IF DOMESTIC squabbles are sticky, investigators say it's even more of a problem when parents want to take adult children away from a cult long enough to talk and see if they're making a decision of their own free will. Most of the persons being sought are adults, with legal rights, and the religious organizations are quick to take legal action against anyone who forcibly abducts a member.

"We treat it like a child custody case," explains Leonard Rancilio. "It's a little bit rougher, though, because of the way they shift these people around. I remember one case took us to Detroit, Miami, back to Detroit, Denver, Colo., and we finally ended up at O'Hare Airport in Chicago where the kid was dancing around with a tambourine in his hand."

"We set it up for the parents to abduct the kid. We had information that the kid was going to be moved out that night. They (the parents) jumped in the car and came right to O'Hare Airport. The kid's father was a big guy, he looked like he used to be a jock. He grabbed the kid by what hair he had and threw him in a car."

"The kid was putting up a fight. All his friends were close by. We ran interference for the family. We told them (the Krishnas) 'Keep begging, but leave us alone.' We were going to throw a luggage rack between them if they started to interfere."

The 19-year-old local youth never returned to the Krishna movement, according to investigators.



Leonard, Richard and Michael Rancilio, from left, are partners in Bell Investigations of Southfield. A sign of the times, they say, is an increase of clients

who pay private investigators to track down sons or daughters who've joined a religious cult. (Staff photo by Mindy Saunders)

Deprogrammers such as Ted Patrick, who has served time for abducting and deprogramming cult members, have run afoul of the law. Investigators at Bell say they admire what Patrick is doing but aren't willing to take the same legal risk.

"My personal feeling is if a guy wants to go out and chant, he can do that," Leonard Rancilio says. "But by the same token what about his parents who are worried sick? He's given up everything they've taught him and they're worried sick. Most of the time the parents just want to talk to the kid and see if it's his decision (to remain in the religious group). I feel for both individuals."

BUT, Rancilio adds, he never forgets who he's working for. And his brother Michael explains, "You don't try to justify a case. You either do it or you don't do it."

That's necessary to remember in

cases where private eyes look for evidence of an unfaithful spouse. Investigators could care less about an alleged infidelity but the client considers the information vital.

Sometimes, says investigator Marty Ravine, the client wants the information to use in divorce action. Other times the client wants to know if his or her suspicions are correct. And sometimes a client with money is obsessed with an unfounded notion that his or her spouse is cheating.

In those cases investigators follow women to Bingo games and their girlfriend's home and report back the uninteresting facts to the client.

Rancilio dispels any notion that private eyes burst into motel rooms to take incriminating photos of extramarital relations.

"Attorneys prefer you get pictures," said Rancilio.

His partner Ravine, says attorneys like pictures of "a guy with his girl-

friend, going into a motel or house together."

"It's good if you can get them embracing or kissing. But whatever goes in inside the motel is your guess. I'm sure they don't go in there to talk."

THE INVESTIGATORS play down their undercover work. They're quick to inform visitors that most of the money made at Bell Investigations comes from leasing private security guards to business.

Then they tell about the time they posed as rat inspectors, making sure they didn't misrepresent themselves as city workers, to gain entry to a basement where they checked for stolen tools.

The tools were there, the information was turned over to the police and an arrest was made.

"Unless you throw it back and we kick it around, it's routine to us," Rancilio says. "But I guess to the public it is kind of exciting."

INSIDE ANGLES

BY LOUISE OKRUTSKY

WORKING ON THE PREMISE of what goes up must come down, the Farmington Community Library is looking for kids who will blue younger during Kids Day on July 22. If you have received an answer call a branch of the library (P.A. Hinton, 474-7770, Hills, 353-0300) and ask for the children's librarian. The library's interested in knowing how far your helium balloon flew. More than 400 balloons floated off that day. (Persons who sent messages in bottles need not call the library.)

EVERYONE NEEDS a soft hand to hold on their birthday and Farmington Hills Police Officer Daryl Slowinski isn't an exception. In his case the hand belonged to a man in a gorilla costume. The costume, hand and birthday greeting was supplied by Bongo Gorilla-gram of Taylor. Bongo, a former police officer, decided there was more to life in brown fur than in blue. Slowinski, who turned 28 last week, received the gorilla greeting from his girlfriend. IA wants to add its own greeting: ugha ugha ugha. Look, it's the best gorilla imitation IA can do.

SOME GOOD NEWS from the Republican convention came to Bea Lindoefer of B'lynn's Coiffures, Farmington Hills. Two Missouri delegates who came into the salon for some emergency hair work didn't forget the folks in the Hills.

"I can't thank you enough for all you did for my friend, Shirley and I. I also couldn't wait to tell my operator how super you treated us," writes Mrs. F. L. Porter of French Village, Mo.

Mrs. Porter and her friend were greeted by television cameras as they arrived home from Detroit — a big event for someone who lives in a small community, she admits.

"Will not forget your kindness, delightful conversations or your warm hospitality. Shirley and I both count all of you among the gems we found in Michigan."

FARMINGTON has been awarded an American Automobile Association Pedestrian Safety Citation for going four years without a pedestrian traffic death. Farmington is one of 57 state communities to receive an award in the 41st annual Automotive Club of Michigan Pedestrian Safety Inventory. Warren, Grosse Pointe Farms, Grosse Pointe Woods, Imlay City and Middleville won awards for excellence in recognition of their accident prevention programs and minimal pedestrian death and injury records. IA salutes Farmington, a place where happy feet walk safe streets.

SOCCER REGISTRATION for kindergarten through fifth grade boys and girls will be conducted from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Aug. 11-15 and from 8:30 a.m.-noon Aug. 15 in the parks and recreation office, 31555 Eleven Mile, Farmington Hills.

There is a registration fee of \$9. Teams will be formed by geographical location and grade. Grade divisions are designated as kindergarten to first; second-third and fourth and fifth. Teams will play a five game schedule beginning the week of Sept. 15. For more information, call the Farmington Hills Parks and Recreation Department at 474-6115.

REGULAR REGISTRATION for fall classes at Lawrence Institute of Technology in Southfield will be conducted from 6-8:30 p.m. August 21 and 28 for students enrolled in the associate studies programs. New students register at 6 p.m. Aug. 19. Evening baccalaureate students register from 6-8:30 p.m. Aug. 27-29. Day students register from 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Sept. 4 and 5. Late registration for all students will be scheduled for early September. For further information call the school at 355-0200.

OUT IN Novi, 12 Oaks hosts a fashion show entitled "Trends — Then and Now." The then portion of the show includes gown one worn by Kitty (I've Got A Secret) Canale, Jean Seberg and the Incomparable Hildegard (Who abandoned her last name and added her very own adjective.) Charles Kleibacker presents the show at 2 p.m., 7 p.m., Aug. 22 and at 1 p.m. and 4 p.m. Aug. 23 in the mall located on Novi Road, north of I-96 and near 12 Mile.

THE FARMINGTON Community Center invites young gardeners to sell their home-grown produce at special rental rates at its farmers' market on Saturdays, beginning Aug. 16 and running through October. Registration must be made by noon on the Thursday preceding each market day. The stand, operated only by children will be supervised by a teacher. For further information call the center from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. at 477-9404.

THE OAKLAND Service Center of the Michigan Cancer Foundation sponsors an ostomy teach-in from 3-5 p.m. Sept. 10 at St. Joseph Mercy Hospital, 900 Woodward, Pontiac. The teach-in led by a rehabilitation nurse and medical social worker is an informal discussion on ostomy care and management for individuals who have undergone colostomy, ileostomy or urostomy surgery. For more information or to register for the program call the Oakland Service Center at 549-4600.

A beginning German course will be offered at the Southfield campus of Oakland Community College from 6-9 p.m. Wednesdays beginning Sept. 10 with professor Josef Wichr. Students may register for the semester on Sept. 2-4. For information call 548-1252

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