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CYBERANGELS Anthony de Araujo and Katya Gifford of Wescosville work to keep the Internet safe from predators. Prevention is a big part of their effort. The CyberAngels is the on-line wing of the Guardian Angels.

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CyberAngels earn wings for keeping Internet safe

Wescosville pair co-manage nonprofit claiming to be world's largest Internet safety organization.

By Christian Berg
Of The Morning Call

Katya Gifford and Anthony de Araujo spend much of their time in a crime-ridden place inhabited by thieves, child pornographers, racists and drug users.

That place is called the Internet.

It's not the way most casual Web surfers view the online world. But de Araujo said many people don't realize how many criminals lurk in the shadows of cyberspace.

"The Internet is inherently not a safe place," de Araujo said. "We're out there to make people aware of the and keep them out of it."

Gifford and de Araujo of Wescosville are co-managers of CyberAngels, which claims to be the world's largest Internet safety organization. The nonprofit group has more than 150 volunteers in the United States and in countries such as Canada, Norway, Italy, Japan and Pakistan.

CyberAngels is the online wing of the Guardian Angels, the safety patrol founded in 1979 by Curtis Sliwa to combat street crime in Bronx, N.Y. Known for their trademark red berets, the Guardian Angels made a splash in the Lehigh Valley earlier this year, when the group formed its first local chapter in Allentown.

But CyberAngels, founded in 1995, has had a local presence much longer than that. Gifford, a volunteer coordinator, joined the Internet watch group in 1998. De Araujo, a computer programmer for Computer Aid of South Whitehall, joined in 2000. The couple assumed day-today

control of the CyberAngels program in January.

Mary Sliwa, wife of the Guardian Angels' founder, serves as CyberAngels executive director. She said Gifford and de Araujo were chosen to manage the program because of their technical skills and desire to serve.

"They are the kind of people who just do things," Sliwa said. "Not only are they both...very current on all the knowledge about Internet safety, they knew what it would take to help people and keep things simple."

CyberAngels works with law enforcement agencies, educators, technology professionals and others. It has three missions: prevention, victim assistance and the monitoring of Internet legal issues.

The group's top priority is prevention. CyberAngels uses online Internet classes, training programs for teachers and librarians and public awareness campaigns to reduce the number of people victimized by Internet crime.

The holidays are a particularly troublesome time of year, Gifford said. That's because many people receive new computers as gifts and begin surfing the Internet without implementing common-sense measures such as anti-virus software, filters to weed out junk e-mail and firewalls that prevent hackers from accessing personal information.

"Every home can take reasonable precautions to take advantage of the Internet without being taken advantage of," said Gifford.

She's an advocate of the World Wide Web despite its pitfalls. "I love the Internet," she said.

"You can find anything, go anywhere, see anything. If you've got the Internet, you've got the world."

The CyberAngels Web site offers a self-help section called "Internet 101" and an area where parents can learn about the Internet and how to protect children while surfing. There is also information about where to find software programs that will filter offensive material, block viruses and allow parents to monitor their children's online activity.

Gifford and de Araujo have five children and seven computers in their home. Gifford uses software that lets her keep an eye on what her children are downloading at all times — without leaving her desk.

"My children know I'm watching," she said, "and they know better than to get into anything that's going to get them in trouble."

But Gifford also warns that even the best filtering and monitoring software is no substitute for common sense and parental responsibility.

"There's no program that can really protect your child 100 percent," she said. "We try to empower parents. Just like any other aspect of your child's life, you learn a little bit and you can take control."

The CyberAngels' second mission is assisting victims of Internet crimes and providing information to law enforcement agencies that prosecute online criminals. CyberAngels works with the FBI and organizations in other countries such as Scotland Yard and Interpol, Gifford said.

The group also fights child pornography in cooperation with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. Over the past seven years, hundreds of child pornography Web sites have been taken offline with the help of information provided by CyberAngels, de Araujo said. CyberAngels' Cybercrime Unit is co-directed by Cynthia Neff of Nottingham, Chester County. Neff served as a University of Delaware police officer for 21 years until she was injured. She now spends 20 to 30 hours a week helping victims of Internet crime and responding to reports of child pornography.

"I love it," said Neff. "I did a lot of investigating while I was at work, I was trying to find something I could do at home. We deal with everything from cyberstalking and harassment, to people with questions about viruses and child predators."

One case, Gifford said, involved the mother of a 13-year-old girl. Her daughter was having sexual conversations with an unknown man in an online chat room. The man was trying to get the girl's telephone number and address.

When the mother confronted her daughter, the girl threatened to run away. CyberAngels provided advice to the mother and helped her gather information that was turned over to the local police department, Gifford said. The girl is safe at home, she said.

Although some critics view the Guardian Angels and their online counterparts as vigilantes, Neff said CyberAngels never takes matters into its own hands. It wants to be an ally to legitimate authorities.

"They're the people to do the work. We just refer the cases to them," Neff said. "I try to give

the clients information so they can do the work themselves, and then they feel a little bit better and they don't feel so vulnerable."

The third CyberAngels' mission is to monitor Internet-related legal issues. CyberAngels has helped educate legislators about Internet crimes. Ten years ago, there were no state laws against cyberstalking, but such laws are now on the books in at least 42 states, Gifford said. Sliwa's goal is to make CyberAngels the recognized leader in online safety education and crime prevention. The group's efforts have captured headlines in publications such as The Chicago Tribune, Boston Globe, San Francisco Chronicle and Washington Post. In 1998, President Bill Clinton presented CyberAngels with the President's Service Award.

Gifford and de Araujo said they aren't devoting more than 100 hours a week to the CyberAngels program for accolades. They want to help people understand that the Internet is a wonderful place and an incredibly valuable resource — as long as it's used wisely.

"There's danger in anything. It's a matter of knowing what you're doing," de Araujo said.

To learn more about CyberAngels or apply as a program volunteer, visit the organization's

Web site at www.cyberangels.org.

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