

Web scam: R you the one? Con artists troll dating sites

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Carol Cormier was nearly taken in by a Nigerian con artist who sent her phony pictures. (Staff photo by Tim Correira)

Like a lot of the women on dating Web sites, Lynn, MA (ed. note: a suburb of Boston) divorcee Carol Cormier was looking for love. What she found turned out to be too good to be true, and now she's on a mission to save other singles from being ensnared in a shockingly widespread online romance scam.

"The only thing I tell them is you opened up your heart and a jerk fell in," said Cormier, 57, who almost lost thousands to a Nigerian who used a phony model's photo to woo her and then tried to bilk her out of her savings.

Cormier says she's one of countless lonely hearts on sites like match.com and eharmony.com who have been taken in by a pretty face. She moderates a Yahoo.com member site for singles slammed by the scam. (ed. note: go to our Links Page and click on the Group's link to learn more or even join.)

The site has 4,500 members, said Barbara Sluppick, who lives in Missouri and started the online support group after she was almost taken in by the same Nigerian scheme that Cormier fell for.

"Every single one has scammers on them," she said. "It's very widespread - more than people know."

For years, people have been duped by e-mail and Internet flimflams that typically involve a man from Nigeria who claims he needs the recipient to wire him money or cash a check. But this one is far worse, Sluppick said. "This is dealing with a person's heart and person's emotions," she said. "The emotional devastation is even worse than the money loss. They join the dating sites thinking this is a good way to meet people."

Cathy Milhoan, an FBI spokeswoman, said the Nigerian rip-off is well-worn and has many faces. "Every day we get complaints about the Nigerian scam in some form or another," she said. The FBI encourages people to report any Internet scams online at www.ic3.gov, which tracks computer crime.

"A lot of time, people think they are the only one," Milhoan said. "The only way we are going to combat it and catch these guys is to report it."

The man who tried to curry Cormier's favor told her he owned a computer company, which

took him to Nigeria, where he ended up in desperate need of money to leave the country. He asked her to set up a bank account for him in America. That's when she got wise to him and called his bluff.

Cormier says she's learned to love again. She met a Kansas man on the Internet and has been dating him for six months. She talks to him every night and has met him once in person. "At least I know I can trust again."