

Looking for love? Keep an eye on your wallet

By Sean O'Key
CNN

April 21, 2008

ATLANTA, Georgia (CNN) -- Julia Abrantes spent hours cleaning her house and primping in front of a mirror before heading to John F. Kennedy airport in New York. She was there to pick up the love of her life, whom she had met on the Internet.

Six hours later, she was still waiting. Nobody arrived.

Abrantes was the victim of romance fraud: a scam designed to prey on her emotions to get her money.

"I was devastated," she said. "He wound up winning my heart."

Abrantes isn't alone. Dating sites like Match.com, which says it has a membership of more than 15 million, are growing in popularity. But with the increased interest in Internet dating comes more people willing to prey on those looking for love online.

Barb Sluppick runs RomanceScams.org, a Web site dedicated to helping victims of romance fraud, like herself. She said the site has had more than 30,000 members since its start in June 2005.

The number of broken hearts aside, romance fraud costs victims millions of dollars each year. Of her 30,000 members, Sluppick said, 883 people have reported their financial losses. They add up to \$8,244,800.05, she said.

There were 206,884 complaints regarding Internet fraud last year, costing victims more than \$239 million, according to the FBI Internet Crime Report.

Romance fraud is a process, often taking place over several months, Sluppick said.

Scammers "establish a strong bond with their victim through constant communication," she said. "They get the person to where they actually believe they have a relationship with the scammer. This can be a long process, sometimes up to six or eight months."

Patrish Giocolo is a moderator for RomanceScams.org. She's also a victim of romance fraud.

"Most people have this picture of this lonely old woman surfing the Internet, but that's not the case," Giocolo said. "These con artists are intelligent, kind, and people are losing their hearts."

Among the members of RomanceScams.org, the financial loss doesn't resonate as strongly as the emotional toll, Giocolo said.

Through the Yahoo Personals dating site, Giocolo met a man from California who had traveled to Ghana to build roads. At least, that's what he told her.

"He said he won a contract in Ghana, but when he got back, he'd like to meet me," Giocolo said.

After the first month, they started chatting on the phone. Giocolo said she had her suspicions, but after some light research, everything seemed legitimate. "I did an Internet search, and sure enough, they were accepting bids in Ghana for building roads."

After a few months, Giocolo's Internet friend started to make requests. "He said someone had stolen his workboots, so I sent him a new pair." Then, it was \$500 to help pay his men.

When the man asked for another \$500, Giocolo hesitated. She was strapped for cash herself and sent only \$150.

Then, after the man claimed that he had been in a car accident and asked for more money, Giocolo got a sinking feeling.

"I literally stumbled on this Web site on romance scams, and boom, there was his picture. Your heart sinks. There was no contract job, no car accident -- it was all lies," she said.

The Web site has a database of photos reported to be used by scammers.

The bottom line, Sluppick said, is to be cautious and find out as much as you can about the person you're talking to.

Match.com, aware of the risks of dating online, provides tips for users to help avoid that one "bad apple."

"We do ... encourage members to do their own research on potential love matches, including asking questions, utilizing Internet search engines, and most importantly, use common sense," the site says.

Craig Butterworth, a communications specialist with the National White Collar Crime

Center, also offers advice for avoiding romance fraud. Mainly, don't give out any information that identifies you specifically. "That would include things like your date of birth, home address or Social Security number. This information can be used to steal your identity," Butterworth said.

He suggests that people not give out directions to their homes.

Also, as a rule of thumb, Butterworth advises against sending money to people you have never met in person.

RomanceScams.org also lists a few red flags to detect a possible scammer: If their spelling is horrible, they use emoticons heavily and they appear to be available at unusual hours for your time zone, they may be scamming you.

Scammers often work on the Internet from other countries and use photos of others they find online. Often, a simple Google search can help identify whether your online companion is legitimate or whether he or she is simply using someone else's name and photo.

In the end, Julia Abrantes said, it's all about educating yourself to the dangers. Though charges were never able to be filed against the individuals who scammed Abrantes and Giocolo, the women admit they've learned something.

"I'm an intelligent person. I'm college-educated, I work for a law firm, but I knew nothing about dating scams. You hear about pyramid schemes and buying stuff on eBay, but nobody talks about romance scams," she said.

CNN's Carol Cratty contributed to this report.

Find this article at:

<http://www.cnn.com/2008/LIVING/04/21/romance.fraud/index.html>