

JAN 19 2006

UNDER THE INFLUENCE

Former meth addict tells tale of drug addiction, ID theft

Editor's note: Over the past two weeks, The East County Californian has presented stories dealing with the rising problem of meth-related identity theft. The following account is a former meth addict's story.

By Andrew Peterson
THE EAST COUNTY CALIFORNIAN

There was a time when his life wasn't that bad. He was in the military. He had a job. He paid his bills. He had things going for him.

He was close to his family, which is normally a good thing. But some of them used methamphetamine or meth — "all the time, just to enjoy life" — is how he puts it now. He calls himself "Ken," an alias for the purposes of this interview.

The day came when one of his kin introduced him to meth and he tried it. He liked it. A lot.

"It was an erotic rush," he remembers.

His life was irrevocably changed — seemingly for the better, at first, but eventually, overwhelmingly for the worse.

"As time went on it became progressively worse," he says. "I got kicked out of the military, I lost my job, and I turned to a life of crime after that."

For three years he supported his habit through burglary, prostitution, and selling drugs. By then he'd fallen in with people who financed their meth habits with ID theft. He didn't take to it right away. But he saw how they lived.

"They had a lot of different merchandise, furniture and jewelry and clothes and drugs, and people were calling them placing orders for stereos

and TVs and stuff like that ... I was fascinated by that."

And yet the first time he stole an ID, he hadn't planned to. All he'd wanted was a car stereo. But once he broke into the car, he found a briefcase. Inside it he found treasure: travelers checks, check books, credit cards — a "spread" in meth world argot. "I opened the briefcase and I didn't [care] about the stereo anymore."

He took the documents to some people he knew.

"They were able to take his picture out of the ID and put my picture on it, and make it look just like it was mine."

Flush with cash, he went on a spree. He wrote checks, cashed the traveler's checks at a casino and gambled, bought clothes and jewelry, even rented cars.

Identity thieves, whether on meth or not, must spend a victim's money fast, or "burn it out." Accounts usually last no more than a couple weeks.

"We would go and get maybe \$6,000 or \$7,000 worth of merchandise on a weekend ... after we burned it out ... we would get rid of it."

Ken didn't feel fear.

"Just the thrill of being able to do it and get away with it makes it all worthwhile," he said.

He did as much as he could to "become the person" whose ID he'd stolen.

"I learned as much as I could about that person, their date of birth and social security number, their address ... then you have the personal information that I can get my hands on, just in case I'm apprehended, and I'm asked certain questions."

He had the advantage of having

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family members who worked at the DMV. They helped him learn things like a victim's mother's maiden name.

"I'd come across a complete spread one night and there were checks, credit cards, ID, keys to this guy's house and everything," he recalls. He took it all and was on his way to another crime when he was arrested.

"I had that guy's identification and everything on me. They arrested me as him. Even though I told them that it wasn't me, they still arrested me as him. I did six months in jail as him."

When he was released he went to the probation department and the stolen documents were returned to him.

"I took that stuff, went straight to somebody else, and said 'Here. I don't want to do this anymore.' That was the turning point for me. And then I never reported back to the probation department."

Since then he has married, helped raise two children (14 and 17), relapsed, separated and joined Narcotics Anonymous. He's still in contact with his wife.

"I'm workin' the steps," he said. "I got a sponsor, a great support group ... I'm trying to be a better person."

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