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**Sting nets anonymous 'flesh surfers'**

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Five people, one from out of state and two each from Tulsa and Broken Arrow, were arrested earlier this week for solicitation of prostitution.

During the **sting** operation, which played itself out at a local hotel earlier this month, Steven Lee Thomas, 47, of 1617 E. 33rd, Joplin, Mo.; Amber Michelle Lowery, 23, of 322 E. 45th Court, Tulsa; Jesse Michael Keefe, 30, of 7750 S. Fulton Place, Tulsa; Raymond Lee Beck, 59, of 3744 W. Freeport St., and Charles Alan Bruce, 42, 1817 S. Seventh St., were each arrested for soliciting an act of prostitution.

A local counselor believes some who solicit sex online convince themselves there is less social stigmatization by using technology – in this instance, the Internet – to do so.

“They may view online, sex-related solicitation as a simple business transaction. With the ubiquitous nature of the Internet cemented in several of the world’s societies, many may also feel less social stigmatization because they conduct these types of transactions online in relative anonymity,” said Cheryl Hyland, a long-time Broken Arrow resident and a working, licensed marriage and family counselor.

However locally, Web anonymity ended in public arrest for solicitation of prostitution.

“Internet communities for customers of prostitution have been around for at least 20 years and are extremely popular because they provide an **anonymous** network of support,” Hyland said.

It is unknown why these particular people chose to use the Internet to solicit sex.

“The [communities] are essentially utilized in order to share information about prices, available services, places to avoid, the rating of prostitutes, etc. At times, these online sites may also share tips on how to avoid police stings and/or arrest.

“Individuals who frequent online prostitution sites like being able to ‘preview’ available prostitutes in the relative comfort and safety of their home or office. They can make arrangements for the services they want without having to drive up and down streets [checking] corners, risking possible recognition or arrest,” Hyland said.

The suspects were caught in one of the largest Internet police-stings conducted by BA police in more than a year, say officials.

“From time to time we check certain Internet sites that deal with sex-related solicitation activities,” said BAPD’s Capt. Greg Sipes. “This last series of arrests resulted from the first real Internet operation we have conducted in more than a year.”

Sipes could not recall in the city’s history, one specific operation that resulted in five arrests for solicitation of prostitution.

A total of 10 officers were utilized in various capacities, ranging from posing online as prostitutes or those soliciting sex, to acting as such in person at the hotel. Other officers made the actual arrests and transported suspects to booking where the suspects were charged.

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