
Point and shoot

How public shaming came back into fashion on the Prairies

By Lucas Provencher

Creep Catchers Founder Dawson Raymond strikes the pose of a heroic, crusading outsider. (Facebook)

MAN PULLS out a camera, hits “Record,” walks up to a young guy he’s never met before, sitting alone in the food court at the Bonnie Doon Shopping Centre. The man holds up the phone and says: “I was wondering if I could ask you a few questions – In regards – I got a couple questions made out. Basically what we’re doing is we’re trying out for *Canadian Idol*, and we’re – essentially we’re mind-readers in a sense. Can we try a few mind-reading tricks on yourself? Do you have a few seconds?”

The young guy doesn’t hesitate. He agrees, even though *Canadian Idol* hasn’t been on the air since 2008, and it never featured psychics. He’s relaxed for someone being filmed. All the collar buttons of his Abercrombie polo shirt are undone, and his hair is brushed up and casually swept aside.

“OK. Umm – I need you to focus on your birthday, and I’m going to reveal it to you,” the cameraman says.

Then he reveals the exact day, month and year.

The young guy smiles, charmed by the trick.

“It’s good, eh?” the cameraman says. He laughs friendly and continues.

“I got a couple more questions.”

“Did you look it up on my Facebook or something?” the young guy asks.

The cameraman lowers his voice and addresses the young guy by name.

“What are you doing meeting a 14-year-old girl?”

The young guy keeps smiling for a moment, before he realizes what has just happened. He hasn’t been charged with a crime; his name will not appear in this story. This story isn’t about him, anyway. It’s about vigilante justice in the 21st century.

Every week in Western Canada, a stranger walks up to someone they believe to be a pedophile and whose name they have fished out of a dating website. There is a confrontation, which is recorded and released online.

This is how Creep Catchers operates. It is the dominant group of pedophile hunters in the country and has listed 17 city chapters, most in Alberta. Eight are still active in the province, if you count the splinter group, Zero Children Hurt, which performed the sting at Bonnie Doon.

This story is about Alberta, but it makes a couple of stops before getting there, and the first is in Eastern Europe.

Katelynn Ariel McKnight was born in Tulcea, Romania, in January 1989, an orphan – a legacy of Communist president Nicolae Ceausescu’s population and austerity policies, and of the revolution that executed him. She was adopted by an Edmonton couple, Phil and Cathy Dunn, when she was 22 months old. She was malnourished, a two-year-old weighing only 18 pounds. Pediatricians placed her on a diet consisting mostly of bananas.

She recovered, then flourished, and the Dunns took her hiking, skating and cross-country skiing through her childhood.

McKnight's teen years were the roughest. Parts of her brain never fully developed, and she was placed in group homes, returning to the Dunns only on weekends.

The second stop runs through a Nova Scotia trailer park, where 29-year-old Justin Payne was raised. He's got dark eyes, his clothes are often dirty and he is very soft spoken. But he will jump on the back of a suspected pedophile's car if they make a break for it, and he hasn't finished talking to them. He grew up poor. A construction worker by trade, he has posed as a vulnerable child on the internet for the last two years.

He told *VICE* that he was inspired in part by the NBC reality show, *To Catch a Predator*.

Brandon University Sociology professor Christopher Schneider studies how media and social media impact police work. He says the proliferation of pedophile hunting vigilantes online was almost a decade old before Payne started his crusade.

Sociologist Christopher Schneider says vigilantism has been spreading. (Courtesy Tiffany Green)

"This can be traced to a *Dateline NBC* report in April of 2006 that put the estimate, the given estimate of sex offenders online at any time, at about

50,000 people," Schneider says. "The thing was, this number was completely made up. Fabricated. False. Erroneous. Not based on any evidence or data whatsoever."

The number was false, but it had legs. It was prominent enough for U.S. Attorney General Alberto Gonzales to cite it. And, in 2006, NBC's *To Catch a Predator* was beating *The Office* and *The Apprentice* in the ratings.

"It sort of drummed up what we refer to in the literature as a moral panic around sexual predators on the Internet and on Myspace particularly in 2005 and 2006," Schneider says. "Different groups sprouted from that, one of the most well-known is called Perverted Justice. You will probably recall that one of the people that they outed apparently committed suicide, so they had to cancel that show.

"You can go as far back as looking at something like wanted posters, and that's a type of early crowd-sourcing, if you want to call it that ... People would spread this information and look for these people."

AYNE CAN sound like the complete opposite of Creep Catchers founder Dawson Raymond. But the two speak about each other like brothers.

The pair of tear drops and the large crucifix tattooed under Raymond's left eye might give you the wrong impression. He says they memorialize two children who were lured off their computers by a child predator and never seen again. The parents, childhood friends of Raymond, killed themselves soon after.

When Raymond saw what Payne was doing in the East ... well, this is what happened next. Like most vigilante activities, it was filmed. So, we know exactly what happened Sept. 12, 2015.

"So, tomorrow morning will be my first bust on these pedophile f****," Raymond says to the camera, a day before. In 24 hours, he will meet a man that he baited to the Marlborough Mall in Calgary.

The moment arrives. The mark is shaking and smoking as he waits beside Walmart

"This is him. Take my phone," Raymond says to his cameraman as he marches in blue jeans and a tank top towards the man.

"You here to meet my 13-year-old sister?" he says, poking the target in the chest.

"How old are you?" Raymond asks. The target answers, but Raymond thinks he's being lied to, so he sticks his finger back into the target's chest to pin him in place.

"Come," Raymond says, as he and the cameraman lead the target out of the mall, bumping into a woman on their way. "Show me where your car is."

As they walk, Raymond is berating the target.

"Why would you do something like that? You know I should bury your f***** face right now in this f***** ground. You know that? ... I'm not going to. You know why? 'Cause your already f*****, man. Authorities already know who the f*** you are. They already got you."

The target, meek until this point, appears to realize that he doesn't have to follow

Raymond into the parking lot, and walks back into the mall.

“You’re done buddy,” Raymond shouts after him. “You’re goin’ to jail.”

The next day, Dawson Raymond woke up, and went to meet his next mark.

No charges were brought against the man from the Marlborough Mall.

Three days later, on Monday, Sept. 14, Raymond was on the cover the *Calgary Sun*, holding his phone and pointing at the reader. The headline read: “CREEP CATCHER: Calgarian outs online predators.” He took to the name, and started promoting a T-shirt design drawn up by a local tattoo artist inspired by the cover photo.

RCMP and municipal police
took notice.

A sketch of Raymond looking like an avenging video game hero. (Facebook)

“There’s nothing positive that comes from what Creep Catchers is doing,” says acting Staff Sgt. Stephen Camp of the province’s Internet Child Exploitation Team. “We have – I think we’re between 30 and 40 Creep Catcher files right now that have come through the office here in the past five months, due to their activities.

“They’re taking it upon themselves unilaterally to be the protectors of society at all costs, including the cost of the individuals caught up in their web, which may be ... tainted. The evidence may be tainted.

“So they’re taking it upon themselves to do everything: To catch. To publicly shame. To act as the prosecution, and the jury that convicts. All in one minute.”

AYMOND’S supporters don’t see it that way. Some sent him free phones to ease his workload. A local vape shop gave him free juice for his e-cig. His most faithful supporters took inspiration from his videos and followed his methods – the way he followed Payne’s.

William Tycholas in Lethbridge, Dallas Snyder in Grande Prairie, Jeffery Lee Illerbrun in Medicine Hat, Tanner Smith in Red Deer, Jordan Latimer in Lloydminster, Jason Catcher in

Parkland County, and David Matthews in Edmonton – later replaced by John Doep.

New videos were being posted weekly from all over the province. Stings were being performed at Tim Hortons, a Smitty's parking lot, and a few in West Edmonton Mall. Some of the targets ran. Others denied. Some broke into teary eyed confessions and begged for forgiveness.

"I'm very passionate about this," Parkland County's Jason Catcher says in a video promotion for the Alberta chapter presidents. "So I'm just going to keep doing it for as long as I can. No matter who says what about it.

In Lloydminster, Jordan Lattimer says his team "is working as hard as possible to expose as many of these predators as we can."

And Edmonton's John Doep calls the movement "the single most important thing in my life."

"After joining, I knew this was my life calling."

This is where Kaitlynn McKnight returns to the story.

It's April and she's at home, wearing a red sweater from the Canadian Birkebeiner Ski Festival. It has hearts and snowflakes on it. The last few years have been rough. She was homeless for a little while, but has been staying at a friend's house recently.

She transitioned from a male to a female in 2012, but is still troubled by issues about her appearance.

There's a knock at the door. Her friend answers, and John Doep is standing there, wearing mismatched socks and a pair of sunglasses.

"Hi, is Katelynn home. Could you tell him to come out?"

Katelynn comes out, looking disheveled.

He says: "Hi Kaitlynn. Hi. I'm here with Creep Catchers."

Kaitlynn tries to respond: "A cree ..." But Doep has already begun the confrontation.

"You're here to meet a 14-year-old little girl."

"No."

"Yeah. Yeah we have the chat logs."

"What are you talking about?"

"I wouldn't have got your address, and I wouldn't have got your name. I wouldn't have come to your house."

"May I ask what you're talking about?"

Kaitlynn tells him her phone was stolen by a meth-addict friend four days ago.

"I am asking that you keep your voice down," she pleads, "because I have already had my name put down so much."

Doep replies: "As I said, you must get in contact with whoever is using your name and your profile and telling people to come to your house to have sex with a 14-year-old."

Kaitlynn tells him she has evidence to back up her claims.

"OK. That's very fair," Doep says as he walks away. "We will see you in court."

No charges were brought against Katelynn Ariel McKnight.

The McKnight confrontation became one of the most popular videos in Creep Catchers history, even making it onto the No. 1 spot of a Top 10 list. Social media were attracting followers, reaching into the tens of thousands, but there was some dissent in the ranks.

IRA MAINES (who asked to use an assumed name to protect her identity) is formerly of the Edmonton Creep Catchers chapter. She says she and her boyfriend left the group after concerns about videos like the McKnight sting weren't taken seriously.

“I felt the catch, guilty or not, should have been handed to professionals and followed up with,” she says via Facebook. “I had volunteered to help them with all mentally ill cases follow-up, and asked that these types of videos not go public.”

She took her concerns to Raymond, who agreed to take the video down, but, despite being removed from Creep Catchers’ social media accounts, it appeared again in August on other video-sharing sites.

Maines wasn’t the only Creep Catcher to jump ship. David Matthews decided to leave after a public argument with Raymond. He rebranded parts of the Edmonton chapter into a separate organization: Zero Children Hurt.

“I still like Dawson as a person after all this,” Maines says. “I know he has the right heart, but his movement slipped away and turned into a very ugly mob mentality that doesn’t fit in 2016.”

Despite the loss of people like Maines and Matthews, Creep Catchers is still growing.

In Surrey, B.C., a year after Raymond’s first confrontation, Const. Dario Devic of the Surrey RCMP was mistaken by Creep Catchers and their supporters as Const. Dan Johnson, and confronted in front of a Boston Pizza. He was later charged with child luring.

In Calgary, Justin Payne made a pit stop on a 4,000 kilometre drive from Toronto to Vancouver Island. He met up with Raymond and new Creep Catchers PR director and local Airdrie celebrity Norm “Average” Nelson in Calgary. Nelson is known for his social media accounts, where he tries to inspire his community and his six kids to be everyday superheroes.

In Edmonton, parishioners and mourners had to crowd under umbrellas as they made their way into the basement of St. Andrews United Church. They came to remember the life of Kaitlynn Ariel McKnight, who killed herself Sept. 7. The memorial was well attended. Phil Dunn personally greeted everyone who entered with a hug and a handshake. He and his wife, Cathy, shared memories from Kaitlynn’s childhood, about hiking, skating and cross-country skiing.

Public blame was split. Some laid it on Creep Catchers. Others laid it on John Doep (now

homeless and living in his car). Still others say the blame belongs to mental illness, and a lack of resources for those who have to cope with it.

The first hymn was “Come Join the Circle.” Damp and cold, the mourners sang.

“Look around and see who’s here/ look at all the faces/ This is the circle of visions and dreams/ of people from all times and places/ Now say hello to the person beside you/ welcome them into the circle/ Each has a gift or a talent worth sharing/ as part of their calling to service.”

The next day, somewhere in Alberta, a Creep Catcher woke up, and went to meet his next target.

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