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Business

Photo e-mailed from Mass. man led to vast global child pornography network

By Jenifer B. McKim | GLOBE STAFF JULY 29, 2012



As soon as they saw the terrified boy's photo three years ago, federal agents Peter Manning and Gregory Squire had the same thought: we have to save him. The blue-eyed child, about 18 months old, was naked from the waist down and clutching a stuffed rabbit for comfort. There was no doubt he had been sexually abused. But that doesn't begin to describe his suffering.

"He looked like he had been crying for three days," Squire recalled in a recent interview.

It's not as if Manning and Squire hadn't been faced with this kind of image — and worse — before. Assigned to the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Homeland Security Investigations office in Boston, their job is to track down child pornographers and victims. Over the years, they've become painfully familiar with some of the hundreds of thousands of child pornography pictures and videos online. Many depict almost unimaginably grotesque attacks on infants and toddlers and are traded like baseball cards by men using obscure Internet outposts to revel in their depravity.

But that single image of the distraught boy with the toy bunny became a crucial piece of evidence for Manning and Squire. It had been e-mailed to them by a Milford man who thought he was sharing it with fellow child-pornography voyeurs. His miscalculation sparked an investigation that would spread around the world, thus far leading to 42 arrests and the discovery of 140 children who were violated. The youngest was 19 days old.

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Robert Diduca, who sent the first photo — which he labeled "cookie" in a reference to the boy — eventually pleaded guilty to the production, distribution, and possession of child pornography. In June, the 48-year-old father of three was sentenced in US District Court in Worcester to 18 years in prison.

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For Squire and Manning, however, Diduca's jail term did not mean case closed. They remain on the front line of a growing international effort to combat child pornography, which has exploded in volume because of faster and more potent technology that makes it easier to create and disseminate the material anonymously. Less than two weeks ago, their investigation prompted the arrest of a Florida puppeteer who allegedly discussed killing and eating children.

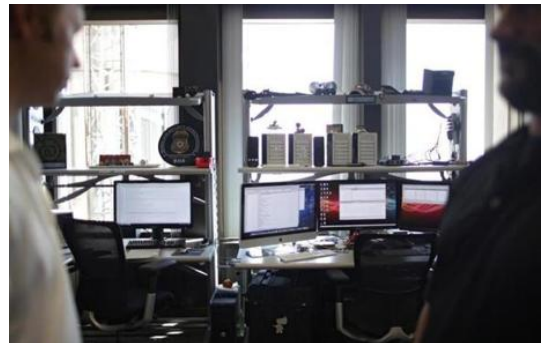
Traditionally, law enforcement has focused on digging up evidence to put offenders in jail. Now, officials are just as intent on finding the victims who, in the past, have often remained unidentified, their images circulating endlessly around the Web's darkest corners.

Investigators scour photos and videos for anything that can pinpoint the location of children and their tormentors — a brand of a bottled water with regional distribution; a program on a fuzzy television screen in the background that can establish a time and region; a toy bunny especially popular in one country.

After Diduca's arrest in November 2010, Manning and Squire mined the trove of 27,000 images he'd stored on laptops, flash drives, and cellphones in his four-bedroom Colonial home and in the Sheraton hotel office in Framingham where he worked. The evidence linked him to other offenders and victims in several European countries, Mexico, Canada, and the United States. Within a few weeks, the agents had helped to uncover a massive child abuse case in the Netherlands. As the scope of the horrors became apparent, Manning turned to Squire and asked, "What have we stumbled across?"

Hiding behind a normal life

Robert Diduca didn't have a criminal record. He



TAMIR KALIFA FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

When agents in the Homeland Security Investigations office in Boston sent a picture of an abused boy with a toy bunny into an international database, it was Nienke Kappelle, a detective with the Dutch national police, who identified the rabbit as Miffy, a well-known character in a Dutch children's book.

appeared to be a decent father and faithful husband to his wife of some 25 years, and he held a job as a hotel manager. But beneath the veneer of normalcy, court records show, he sought, catalogued, and exchanged photos of sexually exploited children, fantasizing about rape and egging on predators to do more harm.

Diduca declined repeated requests for an interview. His former lawyer, Quincy attorney Richard Sweeney, said his client “accepts his punishment, accepts responsibility, and looks forward to spending the next 18 years working on his rehabilitation.” Diduca faced up to 60 years in prison but received a lesser sentence after he cooperated with prosecutors and pleaded guilty.

According to trial testimony and transcripts of online chats, Diduca links his fixation on child pornography to the sexual abuse he says he endured as a boy. He came to the attention of authorities in 2008 after joining an online forum for people interested in having sex with young children that was being monitored by federal agents.

Using “Babytodd” as a screen name — a reference to his fascination with infants and toddlers — Diduca confessed to an “attraction for little boys,” according to court records. In an e-mail conversation with an informant, Diduca said he would sometimes touch, rub, and perform oral sex on the toddler son of a friend.

Like Diduca, many child-pornography viewers collect tens of thousands of images, some of which they share through e-mail chats or members-only online bulletin boards. Websites often feature sections catering to fetishes, including “super hardcore” and “homemade posts only.”

Series of images featuring particular children are especially coveted. Some are decades old and grainy, while others are in high definition. In exchange for the chance to download more pictures, collectors are encouraged to contribute their own content.

Most child pornographers are unmarried white men, according to the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, a Virginia nonprofit. A 2008 study by Michael Bourke, who is now chief psychologist for the US Marshals Service, found 85 percent of men arrested for possession of child pornography had also sexually exploited a child.

Diduca was not charged with molesting children, but photos in his collection depict sadistic behavior, including the rape of infants. In one, a tiny child's legs are tied together, his mouth sealed with electrical tape to muffle screams. Under federal law, knowingly viewing or possessing even one such image is a crime, punishable by up to 10 years in prison.

On several occasions, Diduca allegedly encouraged the abuse, even sending a camera to a man in Arizona and directing him to photograph a 5-year old boy. In some of the resulting pictures, the child was dressed in women's underwear, prosecutors said.

He also asked a man in Wales to send him a video of a sexual encounter with a young adolescent boy, records show.

When Diduca e-mailed the picture of the boy with the bunny to Manning and Squire, they figured he possessed many other pornographic images.

But before the agents could engage him to find out, Diduca abruptly stopped communicating. They decided to wait for him to turn up again — hopefully, with other material to share. They wanted more evidence before moving in. But they didn't stop searching for the boy.

'Nothing comes easy'

Gregory Squire grew up in Western Massachusetts and developed an interest in law enforcement while serving as a US Army paratrooper in the 1990s, stationed at Fort Bragg, N.C. Afterward, he worked for the US Postal Service and attended night school, earning a business degree.



MILFORD POLICE DEPARTMENT

Robert Diduca

In 2007, he was hired as a special agent with the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE, in Boston to focus on cyber crime and child exploitation.

ICE is known for enforcing federal immigration laws, but its agents also go after child pornographers and investigate child sexual tourism and trafficking as part of Operation Predator. The campaign has resulted in more than 8,000 arrests since 2003. Under Bruce Foucart, special agent in charge of Homeland Security Investigations in Boston, the child exploitation division has expanded to 11 agents working full-time.

To many, the notion of spending hour after hour rooting out child predators is unfathomable. Squire, 36, considers it a duty, even if the work sometimes robs him of sleep. Usually, he is able to approach the job in a purely methodical fashion — pressing for clues while shutting out the ugliness. Other times, he is just a man staring at revolting images.

“This is the most important mission I can do, and I am proud to do it,” said Squire, who is a father himself. “Some guy is ritualistically abusing a child who has no voice, and we can stop that.”

Soon after starting at ICE, Squire was teamed with Peter Manning, a 38-year-old self-described computer geek from Colorado with a master’s degree in forensic science. Manning also is troubled by what he sees during the day, and he sometimes dwells on it late into the night. The detective reminds himself that every child is someone’s baby. It strengthens his resolve.

“Nothing comes easy,” Manning said of the grim work.

The men collaborate with a small, congenial team of federal and state officers in Homeland Security Investigations’ new high-tech forensics lab on the 17th floor of the John F. Kennedy building in downtown Boston. They coordinate with investigators around the world who study photos and videos of child abuse.

The volume of child pornography online makes it impossible for law enforcement officials to stop most of it. As months tumble into years, they see some of the same

children in evolving images. Babies grow into school-age children and adolescents. Victims get taller or thinner, they grow breasts and pubic hair. Their pain remains constant.

Foucart doesn't like to leave anybody on the job for too long, although he doesn't set a time limit. The burden of what they do can push agents to drink too much or exhibit symptoms of post-traumatic stress. To check for warning signs, they are required to talk to a psychologist and undergo annual analysis. Foucart lets them know, often, that they can walk away without shame.

“You have to be able to blow off steam,” he said. “You can imagine the potential psychological damage.”

A predator reemerges

Because the picture of the boy with the bunny was of such good technical quality, investigators determined it wasn't taken long ago. That meant the abuse could be ongoing, adding more urgency to the search. Manning and Squire forwarded it to the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children in Virginia, which maintains a huge database of such images.

There has been a proliferation of sexual abuse pictures in recent years with the spread of high-speed Internet access and identity-masking software, according to Ernie Allen, the nonprofit's founding chairman. In 2011, the center's staff reviewed 17.3 million images, more than twice the number tallied in 2009. Most were of prepubescent children, toddlers, and infants.

While many pictures depict the same children, center officials estimate there are tens of thousands of unidentified victims.

“These guys don't collect one or two pictures. We are getting terabytes worth of data,”



JENNIFER MCKIM/GLOBE STAFF

The stuffed bunny, Nijntje (called Miffy in English), is a character in a Dutch children's book.

Allen said. “You identify the victims through tiny bits of information, following the leads, placing the child on planet Earth, and engaging law enforcement in whatever jurisdiction.”

The center couldn't help Manning and Squire, so they sent the image to authorities in other countries, including Canada, Australia, and Ireland. They also contacted Interpol, the international police organization in Lyons, France. Nothing came of the inquiries.

Nearly a year after Diduca sent the photo, he returned to the online forum that was being monitored.

“OMG How many of you belong to a swim club or gym where you come across awesome little toddlers running around naked?” he posted in October 2010, according to the search warrant that led to his arrest. “i love parents especially daddies that have no clue how sexy their lil boys are.”

That admission and others like it gave the agents what they needed. Manning and Squire contacted Massachusetts state trooper John Conron, who obtained a search warrant. Early on Nov. 10, 2010, state police and federal investigators stormed Diduca's house, waking his shocked wife and three grown children. He was already at work at the Sheraton in Framingham, where Squire and other investigators confronted him. Diduca denied the allegations at first, but then admitted to his obsession. He acknowledged sending the “cookie” photo of the boy with the stuffed rabbit but claimed not to know anything about the child.

“A lot of them feel as though it is like a relief,” Squire said. “They spill their guts. They want to tell someone. A lot of them know it is the wrong thing to do.”

Manning, who was with Squire at the hotel that morning, found enough on one of Diduca's computers to take him into state custody. Over the next few days, Manning also located more than 30 photos and videos of the “cookie” toddler. They confirmed the investigators' fears. The abuser who took the picture had also taken photos and shot videos of himself repeatedly raping the boy.

“It was tough to see how far it went,” Squire said. Nonetheless, having the additional evidence was “good news” that moved them closer to a major break.

Soon there would be more news, this time from the Netherlands.

A bunny, a sweater, a rescue

Nienke Kappelle, a detective on the Dutch national police force, treats child pornography crimes like twisted puzzles, piecing together the smallest shreds of information to zero in on sexual offenders and victims. Kappelle, 43, regularly checks a secure international database through which law enforcement officials worldwide circulate photos of unidentified child victims.

In November 2010, she saw the picture of the boy in the Diduca picture. She couldn't identify the child, but knew all about the toy animal he held. It was Miffy, a well-known character in a Dutch children's book. The rabbit — with elongated white ears, round eyes, and an orange sweater — can be bought throughout the Netherlands.

“I thought there is a big chance this boy is Dutch,” Kappelle said. “Still, you don't know for sure.”

She contacted Squire and told him about her suspicions.

Like Miffy, the boy also was dressed in an orange sweater, except his was distinguished by black stripes on the sleeves. Hoping someone had seen it in a store, Kappelle posted a photo online, cropped to guard the child's privacy. Within a day, she was put in contact with small-town shop that sold handmade children's clothing. There were only 21 orange sweaters with black stripes, the owner said. A global search narrowed.

Figuring someone in the area might know the boy, Kappelle asked the producers of a Dutch television show similar to America's Most Wanted to air a sanitized version of picture.

At 9:15 p.m. on Dec. 7, 2010, the phone rang at the home of a pregnant school teacher in Amsterdam. She had just tucked her two sons into bed and was waiting for her

husband to arrive home from work. Her peaceful family life was about to disintegrate.

The caller, a family friend, said she recognized the picture of the boy on TV. He was described as the victim of a serious crime. It looks like your son, she said.

Minutes later, the teacher was on the phone with her father-in-law. He had been watching the same show.

“You have to call the police now or I will do it,” he said.

She dialed and Kappelle answered. Go to the program’s website, the detective instructed. Tell me if it’s him.

“I saw my son,” the boy’s mother — who asked that her name be withheld — recalled during a recent interview in Amsterdam. How could this be possible, she wondered.

It was the boy’s grandfather who made the crucial connection. “Doesn’t it have something to do with your baby-sitter?” he asked on that December night.

Suddenly, the mother knew. Months earlier, her son — an early talker — had mentioned his baby-sitter’s “big penis.”

The parents were appalled, of course, and immediately stopped using the man to watch their child. But they didn’t suspect he had been sexually abused.

The ‘Monster of Riga’

Within hours, police descended on the Amsterdam home of 27-year-old Robert Mikelsons, a Latvian-born daycare provider. Mikelsons had baby-sat the boy several times — in his house and at a respected child care center favored by professional families.

By the time police arrived, Mikelsons — aware of the broadcast — had already deleted many images from his computer, prosecutors said. But there were far too many to wipe clean. He was arrested on the spot and confessed to molesting the boy. During the days of interrogation that followed, Mikelsons detailed attacks on 87 children, most under 2½ years old. He preferred to prey on those too young to talk.

During one session, he chillingly explained why he needed to e-mail lurid photos to another voyeur: “Every artist needs his applause.”



ICE

Robert Mikelsons

He also provided dates and identifying information about specific children. Using those details, 500 police officers were dispatched to knock on the doors of unsuspecting mothers and fathers throughout Amsterdam. The parents, reeling from the news, were called to a private meeting with investigators.

“We didn’t want the press to know because we wanted to tell the families first,” said Alexandra Oswald, a spokeswoman for the Public Prosecution Office in Amsterdam. “At that moment, their lives changed.”

Across the country, people were dumbfounded. Such sex-abuse scandals were unheard of in the Netherlands. A newspaper dubbed Mikelsons the “Monster of Riga,” a reference to the Latvian capital.

Everybody seemed to know someone who had been directly affected, said Marijn Paesschen, a news editor at Amsterdam news station AT5. Even those who didn’t were traumatized.

“Never in the total history of the Netherlands has something this huge happened,” Paesschen said at his office this year.

Casting a global net

On the night of Mikelsons' arrest, agent Squire was driving home from the Homeland Security Investigations office in Boston when Kappelle called to break the news: The boy was safe. Ecstatic, he relayed the message to his partner, Manning, and their supervisors, including Bruce Foucart. But the celebration was short-lived. They knew it was an incremental victory. Diduca and Mikelsons' ghastly collections were crowded with images of unknown children.

"There was no rest," Squire said. "There was so much new material."

Weeks later, they flew to Amsterdam to meet with Dutch police in search of more connections between Mikelsons and the United States. They left with a pile of new images, chat transcripts, and other forensic data.

The operation now had a name, Holitna, after a river in Alaska that has many tributaries. Back in Boston and armed with new information, Manning and Squire burrowed deeper into the ever-widening case. It didn't take long to get results.

They found the record of an unsettling online chat between Diduca and a man who spoke of having a 5-year-old nephew. Diduca talked about sending the man a camera to take pornographic pictures of the boy, even suggesting specific poses.

Using information gleaned from the chat, they were led to Brandon Keith Jones, a 26-year-old Mesa, Ariz., man living with his sister. Jones admitted to Mesa police that he took such photos, encouraged by a "Bob" who lived near Boston, according to court documents.

Police said Jones also was abusing a 4-year-old girl and her 1-year-old sister. Earlier this year, he pleaded guilty to multiple counts of molestation and attempted molestation and was sentenced to 35 years in Arizona state prison. He is awaiting sentencing on federal pornography charges. Sweeney, Diduca's attorney at the time, said in court that his client sent a camera to Jones.

The agents also came across a video in Diduca's files depicting a male toddler being

bound and raped. By examining a program on a television in the background, as well as the furniture, they were able to locate the California hotel where the crime took place.

With the help of other federal agents, they identified the alleged rapist as Shawn Joseph McCormack, who was living in Black Forest, Colo. McCormack, who pleaded not guilty, is now awaiting trial on federal charges of sexual exploitation of children.

More than a year after Mikelsons was caught, the agents went back to the Netherlands. They interviewed him for 16 hours over two days, seeking more US links, some of which they are still pursuing.

Other arrests made through the Holitna network include a US Army soldier, Gary R. Myers, who pleaded guilty to child pornography charges and in June was sentenced to five years in military prison. Investigators said the soldier helped produce real-time videos of children being abused in the Philippines. A Mississippi man, Brian Robinson, was charged with molesting his own son and distributing the photos online. In June, he was sentenced to 60 years in federal prison.

When they think they have seen the worst a human mind could conjure, Manning and Squire are forced to confront new extremes — like the computer files of a Kansas man who was arrested through the Holitna investigation. Images showed a naked boy — about a 1½ years old — lying in a roaster pan in an open oven. Michael D. Arnett, 38, of Roeland Park, was charged in May with producing, possessing, and distributing those pictures.

Arnett's case led investigators to Ronald William Brown, 57, a puppeteer in Florida. Earlier this month, Brown was charged with possessing child pornography and conspiring to kidnap a child. The federal complaint included transcripts that prosecutors said chronicled online chats between Brown and Arnett in which they graphically described the “abduction, murder, and cannibalism of the child victims.”

So far, however, no single image has provided as many leads as the picture of the boy and his bunny.

Justice abroad . . .

The Amsterdam child's parents, while unnamed in the media, felt battered by the frenzy over Mikelsons. Shortly after his arrest, they turned to Richard Korver, a tall, imposing Amsterdam attorney who specializes in defending crime victims. He went on to represent about 45 families whose children were allegedly molested.

"This guy, he went through our city like a true animal," Korver said in an interview this spring.

Most of the families whose children were victimized have declined to speak publicly, fearing their children will be forever stigmatized. Some have kept the truth from friends and relatives. Others have moved; in some cases, out of the country. Marriages have been ruined.

Mothers and fathers churn with anger, blame, doubts. Did I miss something? How could I not know? Some might not ever tell their children what happened.

"People got sick for a long time," Korver said. "A lot of families are living with a secret."

Even though he confessed, Mikelsons still had to be convicted in court and sentenced by a three-judge panel. The formal charges were staggering. He stood accused of attacking 67 children — 52 boys and 15 girls — between 2007 and 2010. Many were ravaged multiple times. Mikelsons' attorneys declined to be interviewed for this story.

During the trial, held over several weeks earlier this year, the Amsterdam court house filled with local journalists, along with lawyers dressed in traditional black robes. Shell-shocked families watched from a separate room, away from reporters. They were allowed a closed hearing with Mikelsons. The parents of the boy with the bunny spoke, describing their initial shock and unending grief. Mikelsons did not make eye contact.

"Everything was there to protect him from parents attacking him or killing him," the mother said in a recent phone interview. "I had to cry. We said what we wanted to say."

During the trial, some facts detailed by prosecutors were so appalling that journalists stopped writing, pens frozen above notebooks.

Mikelsons, dressed in a sweatshirt and sneakers, told the judges he was under a “curse” that couldn’t be suppressed. He spoke of going to baby-sitting appointments equipped with a camera, lubricating oil, and a computer.

Late in the trial, he apologized.

“It was never my intention to hurt people,” he said in Dutch, according to court transcripts.

Several weeks later, in May, Mikelsons was convicted and given an 18-year jail term, plus an unspecified amount of additional time for psychiatric treatment. The sentence was too harsh, he complained, before throwing a glass of water in a judge’s face.

Child rape and pornography laws are more lenient in the Netherlands than in the United States. Under local law, Mikelsons is not punished separately for each crime.

In the aftermath of his rampage, Amsterdam officials created a commission to report on how Mikelsons was able to molest so many children without being found out. Out of that study came a requirement that childcare centers have at least two people watching children at all times.

. . . and at home

In early June, a handcuffed Diduca was led into Worcester federal court. Manning and Squire sat in the back of the room as assistant US attorney Michael Yoon recounted the investigation’s evolution, starting with the e-mailed picture of the Amsterdam boy. Diduca, said Yoon, “participated at every level of the child pornography underworld.”

Sweeney, Diduca’s lawyer, told Judge F. Dennis Saylor that his client was sorry, and had sought treatment since his “secret life was exposed.”

Diduca didn’t speak during the hour-long session.

Before imposing the 18-year sentence prosecutors wanted, Saylor said he had read “moving” letters written on Diduca’s behalf by his wife and children. Several victims submitted equally powerful statements about their suffering, he added.

But Saylor refused to look at any of the images entered into evidence. The judge said he “didn’t need” to put himself through such an ordeal. “I feel sick to my stomach about the victims, and I feel sick to my stomach about the defendant’s family.”

As they left, Manning and Squire shook hands. They were satisfied. Temporarily. The agents were soon back at work in the JFK building, trying to ensnare other Diducas and Mikelsons.

Across the Atlantic, the family of the boy with the bunny moved into a new home — a start at rebuilding. Only a start. His parents won’t leave their child, now 5 years old, alone with any adult. They worry about what will happen if his past victimization ever becomes publicly known. They live with the knowledge that images of him are likely still on the Internet, being downloaded to some deviant’s computer. It’s like being attacked again every day.

But the family is not finished with Diduca. They have hired a lawyer in the United States to seek restitution, and a court hearing is scheduled for September in the same Worcester court house where Diduca was sentenced.

The mother wants to meet the man who took perverse pleasure in her baby’s rape. She wants him to know that her son is real, not a fantasy.

She says she wants to look at Diduca, one parent to another, and tell him, “This is the life of an innocent child you have destroyed forever.”



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