

Resorts can be opportunistic for

By Jay Hodgkins
Staff Writer

REHOBOTH BEACH — An Eastern European man calling himself "Alexi" stops his car on Route 1, threatens three Bulgarian women and tells them they're not getting out of the car until they each give him \$90 more.

Anne Marie Conestabile, volunteer director of the International Student Outreach Program, said this is what one predator did to three Bulgarian college stu-

dents coming to Ocean City to work for the summer after he picked them up at John F. Kennedy Airport in New York.

"The girls cried and didn't know what to do," Conestabile said. "This guy picked them at the airport and told them he'd take them to the Greyhound station and charges them \$40. Once he gets there, he says, 'Oh, the bus just left,' and says he feels so bad he'll take them to Ocean City and charges \$69 each."

But then, Conestabile said, comes the scam in Rehoboth when the girls are scared,

confused and easily tricked into giving away so much of their start-up money.

Although the resort areas from Ocean City north through Bethany Beach and Dewey Beach to Rehoboth Beach are relatively safe, they give criminal predators certain opportunities unavoidably linked to being tourist destinations littered with vulnerable seasonal workers and visitors.

Rehoboth Beach Police Chief Ray W. Banks said his department has gotten to

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predators

Predators

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many reports of female foreign students coming to work for the summer who are picked off by predators and tricked into prostitution.

"We get informants and intelligence from our officers that foreign students may be prostituting for money," Banks said.

"Stay two or three hours in the airport or bus station where these kids arrive and you see all these guys lurking around trying to get them into prostitution by offering modeling or dancer jobs," Conestable said. "They are nice, naive young girls who are pretty and they get enamored with the idea."

The thousands of foreign students unfamiliar with America aren't the only targets that attract predators to the area, though, as American college summer workers and recent high school graduates are at risk, too.

On June 11 at 4 a.m., senior-weekers hid in their locked bedroom as police said Semeredin Bedaru, 23, of Rockville, Md., allegedly broke into their home and tried to break down their bedroom door after one of the girls turned down his sexual overtures at a nearby bus stop.

"We see it's mostly young on young," Ocean City police spokesman Barry Neeb said. "From all the ones we've seen they tend to be on the south end around the 28th Street area, the Boardwalk and beach at night when they're not supposed to be there anyway."

Ocean City Police Chief Bernadette DiPino said one of the important factors that gives criminals a unique opportunity in resort areas is how people tend to act with less caution while here.

"People on vacation don't necessarily pay as much attention as they do at home. They come

and let their hair down," said DiPino said.

But organized and premeditated predators aren't just a concern for women letting their hair down. Neeb said Ocean City has suffered from an unusually high summer of organized gang activity, with about six apparent incidences so far.

That same June 11 night, at least six alleged members of the Baltimore-area Crips gang performed two "schwans," according to police, in which they lured two lone males into drug transactions and then robbed and beat them.

"People not paying attention to their surroundings, people naive and without worldly experience are vulnerable," DiPino said.

Although nowhere near common, the ultimate case came on Memorial Day weekend in 2003 when Benjamin and Erika Sifrit lured a couple they met on a public bus to a hotel room and systematically murdered them, eventually landing both Sifrits long-term jail sentences.

Police departments do what they can to limit predators' opportunities with vulnerable prey, but they often operate with the appearance of being a helping hand.

"I see people wait in their cars for kids to get off the bus," said the Rev. Ward Kovacs of Lutheran Church of Our Savior in Rehoboth, who works with foreign students there.

"They'll say, 'It looked like they were lost and needed a ride,'" Banks said. "They could have been legit, they could have been trying to help, but I don't like to see that so we move them along."

"We don't want rapes ... and we don't want anyone harmed from getting in a situation that might result in a sex act," Banks said. "We don't want anybody getting taken advantage of; we just want them to have a nice stay."

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