

Inquiring Eyes

Private investigator Melinda Kidder, owner of Columbia Investigations, uses her natural inquisitiveness and discipline developed through martial arts to solve cases.

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Don Shrubshell photo

Private investigator Melinda Kidder, owner of Columbia Investigations, videotapes the arrest of a woman she was hired to track. Kidder waited for the woman to leave her home and drive her car. Because the woman has a revoked driver's license, she was in violation of the law, Kidder said.

Melinda Kidder stresses her integrity, noting that she is careful to make sure the information clients hire her to uncover will be used for "a good purpose."

MOBERLY — It's not long after 6 a.m. on a brisk autumn day, and Melinda Kidder is already on her third cigarette. A private investigator, Kidder is conducting surveillance. She glances anxiously into her rearview mirror at a parked car at the center of a big headache.



Rick Gurley, owner of Risk Management Research & Investments Inc., has been a private investigator for 14 years. He uses the Internet and computer forensic techniques in his business.

Don Shrubshell photos

“This is just like ‘Magnum, P.I.’ isn’t it?” she said with a laugh. “Only without the guns, excitement and the good weather.”

Kidder’s target today is a known drug user who is on probation and has a revoked driver’s license. The woman works at a job requiring a 45-minute commute and breaks the law by driving herself to work, Kidder said.

Kidder was hired by the woman’s ex-husband and his wife, who don’t want the woman to have rights to visit her child. She has broken too many promises, they say, and might have exposed the child to drug activity. The investigator’s job is to catch the target driving her car. Her clients hope it will put the woman back behind bars.

Kidder, who owns Columbia Investigations, is one of 17 private investigators licensed to work in Columbia. She said the work is less glamorous than it appears on television. Local private investigators, or PIs, earn a living by doing things like serving court papers, digging through trash for information and staking out buildings for hours.

Rick Gurley, a Columbia PI who has known Kidder for two years and sometimes refers cases to her, said the work is about being discreet. Gurley has worked as a private investigator for 14 years and owns Columbia-based Risk Management Research & Investments Inc.

“You always see surveillance on TV and people getting in confrontations or gunfights and fistfights,” he said. “The fact of the matter is, if you’re out on surveillance and you’re confronted, you screwed up something. The whole object is for the target never to know you were there until it goes to court and they see a video of themselves.”

Kidder’s latest assignment was supposed to be easy. “I told her, ‘This is going to be the easiest case you’ll ever have,’ ” said one of the people who hired Kidder for the Moberly job. “I handed her everything. I gave her all the information on a platter.”



Private investigator Melinda Kidder watches for activity at the Moberly home of a woman she was hired to track. Kidder sometimes spends hours conducting stakeouts as part of her business, Columbia Investigations. At above right is Kidder’s badge.



But it hasn't proven easy so far. Several weeks earlier, Kidder sat outside the same Moberly home for five hours before following the woman's red car onto southbound Highway 63. Kidder called police, and her call was bounced to Kansas City before a local dispatcher told her no officers were available to make the arrest. "The dispatch just decided it wasn't important enough," she said.

On this day, Kidder is taking extra precautions. About an hour into the stakeout, Kidder calls the Moberly Police Department to ask for help arresting the subject, saying, "I'll call as soon as she's rolling."

Moberly police sound receptive to the plan, saying they'll try to "get the intercept done." But the officer on duty hints that it will be low on the day's priority list. "We only have two road officers today, so it depends on when you call if one's available or not. It's just the luck of the draw," he said.

Kidder lights up another cigarette. She's already spent 10 hours on this case and at \$75 per hour it has become extremely expensive for her clients. Kidder usually charges \$100 an hour, and some investigators charge even more.

At such a hefty price, she must call the clients constantly to ask whether to keep up the stakeout or abort the mission. Now she just wants the job to end — with an arrest. "Hopefully it's not going to end up being just another slap on the wrist," she said. "You never know."



Private investigators today have a lot of competition.

Anyone with computer access can search the Internet for criminal records, Social Security numbers and, in some cases, cell phone records. Private investigators have to be more tech savvy than the average person and able to stomach extended stakeouts. Kidder has installed a portable toilet in one of her vehicles and said she's "probably done 30 crossword puzzles on one surveillance job."

Some private investigators specialize in "Internet profiling" and make a living searching the nooks and crannies of the Web for information. Within minutes, Kidder and other investigators can find aliases, multistate criminal histories and employment data through databases open only to licensed PIs.

Gurley uses technology to help people accused of accessing illegal pornography. He owns sophisticated computer forensic software that allows him to dig deep into the hard drive history of every site ever visited and every file downloaded by a user.

"You never really delete anything from your computer. You overwrite it," Gurley said. "With the software I have, I can lift layers of stuff to get it again."

Gurley said private investigators who know how to master the Internet with tricks such as tracing the source of e-mails are at a major advantage. "The Internet to me is the best thing since peanut butter," he said.

But private investigation also is becoming more regulated.

Legislation now being considered in Missouri would create a statewide licensure requiring investigators to carry a minimum of \$250,000 in insurance.

The Missouri Association of Private Investigators supports the legislation, saying it would weed out part-timers and bail bondsmen who only occasionally do investigative work. Currently, licensure is done by cities. Annual registration costs \$28.50 in Columbia, according to city officials.



By 9:20 a.m., there's still no sign of Kidder's target.

It's becoming clear the woman has no plans of making it into work during normal business hours, and Kidder suspects she got drunk or high the night before and is sleeping it off. To make matters worse, Kidder can't reach her clients by phone to ask whether to continue the expensive stakeout.

"It's tough, because if we don't wait and she leaves, then they've wasted all this money," Kidder said of her clients. "I want it to go well. You know, they seem like really good people, and they have a valid reason to want her off the streets. She's just bad news."

Kidder, who is 37, is not a typical gumshoe. A fourth-degree black belt in Korean martial arts, she was adopted as an infant and grew up in Kansas City not knowing her birth parents. As a result, she said, she's always had "an inquisitive mind" and looked to seek out truths behind closed doors. Her martial arts experience has helped her develop patience and self-control needed in private investigation work.

In college, while studying criminal justice at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, she won the Edward Tomich Award for exemplifying traits including "an unquenchable thirst for knowledge and personal growth."

After graduation, Kidder took jobs that gave her both the thrill of the chase and a feeling she was doing good. She worked public safety detail at Kansas City's famous Country Club Plaza dealing with drunks and degenerates, she caught shoplifters as a store detective at Marshall's and she tracked delivery truck drivers for a hardware store guarding against theft.

Most rewarding, she said, was a volunteer position as the special advocate for children in the family courts system in Jackson County. There she made sure children legally removed from dangerous environments were placed into safer ones.

"There were a lot of cases where the first thing the court would do is put them with a family member. The problem is the family member is part of the same environment," she said.

Seven years ago, she moved to Columbia with her partner and the couple's adopted child. Gurley recalls meeting Kidder two years ago, when he bought a desk set from her. She talked about wanting to join the ranks of the city's private investigators, and he gave her tips on where to go for insurance. The two have had a good working relationship since.

“She’s one of the better ones. She’s dependable, she’s honest. If I’ve got extra work, I’ll send it to her, and that speaks for her in itself because I’ve gotten burned by so many PIs, I’m very leery now,” Gurley said.

For the past two years, Kidder’s been splitting time between PI work and a martial arts school and supply business she runs from her home. She sees investigative work as an extension of her work in social service. “I do my due diligence to check out a client. You have to make sure the client is a safe person and wants the information for a good purpose,” she said.

Her client list has steadily grown, and recently she expanded her business and employed a “decoy,” a woman she will hire to ensnare cheating husbands.



Back in Moberly, it’s past 11:30 a.m., and things are starting to look bleak. Kidder is considering calling off the stakeout and dreads the thought of telling the clients about another failed mission. And then, without fanfare, the target walks out to the car and puts something inside. Kidder pulls the surveillance vehicle a few feet forward and stares intently through a pair of binoculars. The target comes outside, get into the car and backs out of the driveway.

“Oh, this rocks the casbah,” Kidder said excitedly.

Close in pursuit, Kidder calls local police, who trail the car for several blocks before pulling over the woman. They administer a field sobriety test on the side of the road before putting her in handcuffs and arresting her for felony driving while revoked. Her first court date is set for later this month.

Kidder said she feels relief and satisfaction for her clients, whose total bill came to \$1,200. “I love to be the bearer of good news,” she said before calling to tell of the arrest.

But she also wonders about the woman under arrest. She’s been jailed before. Will this be the time she cleans up?

“I would hope that she takes the chance to get right with herself and right with other folks, but I think the odds are slim because she’s had so many other chances,” Kidder said.

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