

Women sleuths are making strides Delaware PIs say work can be hard, but is rewarding

By LULADEY B. TADESSE / The News Journal
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Dorothy Snow doesn't carry a gun, leap from helicopters or flirt her way to the solution of a crime like one of Charlie's Angels.

Snow, a private investigator from New Castle, does background checks, reads depositions, conducts surveillance and tracks evidence. Most of her clients are insurance companies, corporations and law firms that want her to investigate insurance and workers' compensation fraud.

Being a female private investigator is fun, but not always glamorous. It is always hard work, often with long hours away from home and family.

"Surveillance can be long and boring," said Snow, a former Chicago parole officer and police investigator. "But I love what I do. ... It's the mystery, solving problems, looking for answers and knowing you are doing good for the society in general."

Snow is one of eight women who run private investigation companies in Delaware. As owner of Alpha & Omega Investigations Inc., she represents a rapidly growing part of the private investigation industry: women.

"Women are the fastest growing segment of private investigators in the United States," said Jimmie Mesis, editor in chief of PI Magazine, an industry publication with 30,000 subscribers in 20 countries.

Thirty years ago, there were only a handful of female investigators in the entire country. Today, women are penetrating the once male dominated world of the private eye. In Delaware, since 1994, the number of female private investigators who head their own companies has doubled from four to eight. The total number of private investigation firms has grown from 62 to 99.

Mesis estimates there are about 60,000 licensed private investigation companies in the country with about 40,000 employees who are not owners. He estimates 8 percent of investigators are women.

Former police officers, housewives, writers, paralegals, mystery shoppers employed by retailers and other women are increasingly finding opportunities in the industry.

Mesis said women of all ages are joining the field.

It's a litigious society where workers' compensation and liability insurance claims are rampant. Terrorism has companies concerned about the safety of their workers and financial transactions. As a result, demand for private investigators is on the rise.

Private investigation is among the most rapidly growing occupations in the country, expected to increase 35 percent by 2012, according to the Department of Labor. And women are taking advantage of these opportunities.

'A closed club'

Many of Delaware's private investigators run one- or two-person shops. About a quarter of them also run security services providing patrols and guards for local companies.

The average wage for a private investigator is \$15.79 an hour or about \$32,838 a year, according to the state Department of Labor. But experts say, depending on experience and type of cases handled, the salary of an established private investigator can exceed \$100,000 a year. Delaware has one of the strictest licensing laws for private investigators in the nation, requiring individuals to be at least 25 years old and have five years of law enforcement or managerial experience at a private investigation company before they can open their own company.

An individual who is 21 years old can work for a licensed private investigator. Investigators licensed in other states cannot set up shop here without a Delaware license.

The work is exciting

Most private investigators' assignments are not life and death cases.

A typical case handled by Snow involves surveillance and conducting telephone pretext calls.

Often a surveillance begins as early as 5 a.m. and can last more than 10 hours. That is when you catch the individuals on

workers' compensation who say they are not working but come back home from their night job. It's also a good time to discover a person's daily routine.

Snow's company has saved insurance companies hundreds of thousands of dollars in fraudulent claims. For example, she and her investigators recently caught a man who claimed he was too ill to work and had received more than \$50,000 in workers' compensation claims. All the while, he was working as a construction contractor. New Jersey is currently investigating the case, using some of the evidence collected by Snow's investigators.

Snow, who sometimes wears disguises and drives different cars, said she can't imagine doing something more exciting than being an investigator. To her team of seven investigators, she's "Mommy Charlie."

"I do love my work. I get excited like a child just before Christmas and it has been like that since I started," she said.



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