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Area teen learns tough lesson through door-to-door sales

By Jim DeBrosse
Staff Writer

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MIAMISBURG — Jonathon Pope kept his door-to-door sales pitch simple and sweet, saying he was the son of the woman down the street and selling magazines to help the Blackhawks select baseball club.

If customers asked which woman, he'd say, "You know, the one who walks the golden retriever every morning."

Only one problem — none of it was true.

And the better Pope got at lying, the more sales he made as part of an itinerant sales crew that traveled the country working all day and partying all night, the 19-year-old Miamisburg resident said.

Pope spent six months in an industry under growing scrutiny for allegations that its young sales people are encouraged to spin stories to meet quotas and are either induced or coerced to stay on the job by easy access to drugs, limited access to their paychecks and mental and even physical abuse from managers.

Earlene Williams, whose organization Parent Watch Inc. filed a



has hampered telemarketing sales.

Pope said he was never the victim of physical abuse and never directly witnessed any, but the verbal and mental abuse from managers and other crew members was like boot camp. "They yell at you, they cuss at you. They would tear you down in every way possible so they could build you up again the way they wanted you to be."

But Pope also admitted that he got into drugs, including methamphetamines and crack, while traveling with the crew. He was never given those drugs from managers, he said, but their use was popular among many crew members. "The lifestyle just sort of sucks you in, and you get stuck. I thought at one time there was no way I would ever get out."

Pope said members of his crew were given a minimum of \$15 a day for meal allowances, on up to \$20, depending on whether they met or exceeded their quota of 15 subscriptions for the day.

"Most of the time I met my (daily sales) quota early and I'd end up taking a two- or three-hour nap," he said. In the evenings, the car-handler would pick up the crew members, return them to the motel, where the partying would last until 4 or 5 in the morning, he said. The working day would begin again at 8:30 a.m. for those who didn't meet their quota, and 9:30 a.m. for those who did.

To meet his quota, Pope said he was instructed to make up stories by more seasoned sales people, but never by a manager. "They're smart. They know they can't do that themselves, or they'll get caught," said Malinda Quattlebaum, Pope's mother.

The standard line was that the crew was selling subscriptions to raise money for a select baseball club, usually called the Blackhawks "because nearly every town has a team named the Blackhawks," Pope said. The pitch was further personalized by having the sales people say they were sons or daughters of a neighbor "down the street."

But once the crew hit Texas, Pope said, word had spread about the phony select baseball clubs, so he and other crew members began posing as University of Texas students working their way through college. Pope said managers never officially endorsed the college student ruse but they paid for University of Texas sweatshirts and T-shirts for crew members to wear.

The turning point for Pope came in Texas, where he was arrested by police for false representation and threatened with a lawsuit by the

University of Texas. When his managers refused to give him any legal backing, Pope said he purposely failed to meet his sales quotas to get out of the business. Within days, he was separated from the rest of the crew, dropped off at a Wal-Mart parking lot near San Antonio with just \$17 in his pocket and told to find his own way home, he said.

Pope's traveling days are over. He now works at a McDonald's restaurant he can walk to from his mother's home in Miamisburg and is saving up his money so he can go to technical school. "I'm just trying to get back on my feet again."

Pope said his magazine sales crew experience taught him at least one important lesson.

"I learned that you can easily be manipulated by other people and what they tell you. I just learned not to follow anyone but me."

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How to protect young sales people

Earlene Williams of Parent Watch Inc., a nonprofit clearinghouse for information on traveling sales crews, offers this advice:

Don't buy magazines or books from door-to-door sales people. "If the kid suffers more in the short-term (from lack of sales), they may leave faster and find a safe haven."

Don't invite them into your home, but ask the sales person if he or she is in trouble and wants to make a phone call for help.

If they have no family to call, recommend Parent Watch

(212) 666-4221 or www.parentwatch.org.

If you do plan to buy a subscription, ask to see identifying information for both the sales person and the organization they say they are raising money for.

Always pay with a check. Some sales people will pocket your cash and not turn in your sales receipt.

Sources: Parent Watch Inc. and Jonathon Pope

a former door-to-door sales person

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