

A feeling's all you need on social media, as Big Lake and Eagan panics show

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Big Lake Police Department

"Roger, I am proud to call you my friend!!!!" Big Lake Police Chief Joel Scharf took to social media to defend a resident who was falsely branded a "creeper" on social media. This photo was on the Police Department's Facebook page.



[Jennifer Brooks @sribrooks](#)

There was no masked predator hiding in the bushes in Eagan.

No one was snapping pictures of children at the bus stop in Big Lake.

But people felt like they were.

And a feeling's all you need on social media.

“This creeper man was taking pics of houses on Fair Meadows Drive,” a Big Lake resident posted on a community message board in October, along with the photo she'd snapped of an unfamiliar white pickup truck. “[H]e rolled down the window to clearly take a pic of my son & neighbor boy at their bus stop. I'm not OK with that! Be on the look out!”

“There have been three reports of a man wearing a mask near the woods in the park acting strangely,” Eagan police warned the public in June.

As the alarm went up, the reposts went out. Hundreds of people shared the two Facebook posts. Strangers crowded into the comments, speculating about the Big Lake “pervert” and the “creepy” masked figure in Patrick Eagan Park.

“We were there [in the park] for the first time Friday around 12:45,” one resident posted. “I kept my key fob in my hand the whole time because I had an uneasy feeling! Wow.”

Word spread across town, then across the county, then across the country.

In Eagan, word got back to the parents of [a shy 11-year-old](#) who'd started wearing a mask to the park after some big kids bullied him.

In California, someone clicked on a post about the Big Lake creeper and realized the truck belonged to a relative — a 71-year-old man who'd pulled over to the curb on Fair Meadows Drive on a crisp fall day to check the directions to his son's new house, one block over.

His name was Roger and the comment section [broke his heart](#). His neighbors, in the town where he'd lived for 50 years, were calling him “pervert.”

Big Lake Police Chief Joel Scharf roared to Roger's defense, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with him in a Facebook post of his own, warning of the dangers of thoughtless social media posts.

“On social media, the perception is real,” Scharf said this week. “So if somebody posts their perception of something, people grab it and run with it as if it actually happened, without taking the time to check the facts.”

Scharf still remembers the creepy clown panic of 2016. Someone posted a few shots of a clown skulking around the darkened streets of Green Bay, Wis., with a handful of black balloons and suddenly, creepy clowns were everywhere.

As fear spread, so did the clown sightings. South Carolina. Canada. England. New Zealand.

Clown sightings closed schools in Ohio. Target yanked clown masks off the shelves. Penn State students ran through the streets waving baseball bats and tennis rackets after someone spotted a clown on campus. A man in a clown mask stabbed a teenager in Sweden. A 15-year-old girl in Minnesota girl posted [death threats](#) on Facebook under the alias Kroacky Klown: “Should I come to Hopkins and kill?”

Scharf wishes people would pause, just a second, before they shared that post that scared or infuriated them on social media.

Ask yourself, he said: Is this post necessary? Is it true?

At least Roger had the Big Lake police to defend him.

Eagan prosecuted that scared little kid in the mask.

“ ‘Lots of people were scared and there has to be consequences.’ That’s what they told my daughter,” said Greg Scott, who watched his grandson sit in a courtroom last month as witness after witness testified to their fright at the sight of a 4-foot-9 middle-schooler in a mask playing in a public park in broad daylight.

Dakota County prosecutors charged the boy, now 12, with disorderly conduct and — if you can believe it — misdemeanor fifth-degree assault.

Since the kid didn’t assault anything but the sensibilities of people who don’t know a masked superhero when they see one, the judge tossed the assault charge and sentenced him to 10 hours of household chores.

The entire ordeal left the family with \$3,500 in legal bills and left everyone else feeling worse about humanity.

“We have a lot of smart technology,” said Scott, who wrote his own [account of the saga](#) on his blog at [dgregscott.com](#). “We need to be smarter about how we use it.”

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