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Serious about safety

By Bryn Keating (published: July 20, 2006)

Sheriff's deputy moonlights to offer parents 'peace of mind'

PORTLAND – When Michael O'Neal's daughter, now 9, brought home a safety identification card from school, he knew there had to be a better way to respond if she were ever placed in danger.

"I thought, this isn't going to do justice if something ever happened to our child," O'Neal said last week.

So the part-time patrol deputy sheriff for Cumberland County launched the Guard-A-Kid of Maine franchise.

Guard-A-Kid, based in Florida, offers educational and child safety products designed to respond to the more than 200 missing children cases reported daily in the U.S., O'Neal said. The basic package costs \$20 and includes two laminated ID cards and an 8x8 sheet with a child's photo, description and 10 individual fingerprints. The fingerprints are also placed on a CD-ROM, which allows law enforcement easy access to each print.

The package "includes everything we need as law enforcement," O'Neal said. He added that, while some groups provide fingerprinting for free, typical videotape formatting is inconvenient. He said information on CD-ROM can be instantly e-mailed across the country, saving valuable time.

"The first hour (a child is missing) is critical," O'Neal said.

The package, which should be updated annually, is available to anyone. The information cards may also be helpful for adults with Alzheimer's disease, who may wander from their homes, O'Neal said.

O'Neal so far has traveled throughout Cumberland, York, Sagadahoc and Androscoggin counties with his digital fingerprint scanner, and he said he is willing to travel anywhere in the state. He also works at fundraisers and schools. One of his goals is for schools to start offering an annual "ID Day," much like school photo day, he said.

O'Neal also organizes parent awareness nights with area parent teacher associations. He said it's important for parents to feel comfortable with him and his products before he takes their child's picture.

One day-care provider enjoyed his presentation so much, that O'Neal has hired her to work for Guard-A-Kid. He has also recently hired two elementary school teachers, he said, and has a Web site at www.guardakid.com/me.htm.

In addition to the basic package, Guard-A-Kid offers interactive safety products, from wireless child locaters in the shape of teddy-bear charms to DVDs and board games that teach safety



Mike O'Neal fingerprints Owen Dionne at First Lutheran Daycare on Auburn Street in Portland. O'Neal has recently launched Guard-A-Kid of Maine, a company that sells child safety products and offers ID and fingerprinting services.

Courtesy of Portland Neighbors

precautions.

O'Neal said the products teach kids more than to just "keep away from strangers." If a child sees an adult more than once, he noted, they tend to feel comfortable with them.

"Children are programmed to trust adults," he added.

O'Neal has also discovered Kid Escape, a technique created to teach children how to get away from a kidnapper. The "grip, dip and spin" method, he said, "ruins a perpetrator's game plan so that his main focus is to get away from you."

O'Neal is training to be one of three Kid Escape instructors in the country. He hopes to begin presenting at schools in early autumn.

With more than 50 franchises across the country, Guard-A-Kid is "a growing trend," O'Neal said.

He urged parents and children to always be aware of their surroundings and never take anything for granted.

"Parents don't think this is ever going to happen to them," O'Neal said, "but \$20 is a small price to pay for peace of mind."

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