

After 18 years of marriage, Stephanie strongly suspected that her husband was cheating on her. She had picked up all of the signals, but she didn't have any evidence. Liz was afraid that her teenage son was dealing drugs, but she couldn't prove it. Monica had met the proverbial "man of her dreams" through an online dating service. When he continually avoided meeting her face-to-face, she knew in her heart that something was wrong.

Just like these individuals did, if you have doubts about your relationships—and when you must know the truth—it may be time to call Rick Johnson, private investigator and principal of Rick Johnson & Associates of Colorado, Inc.

"More than 60% of my clients are women," Rick says. He adds that he is not only a problem-solver, but a voice of reason for those who simply don't know who else to turn to. Rick has been a Colorado Private Investigator (P.I.) for more than two decades. He began his career with the District Attorneys' Offices in Denver and Jefferson counties, and he has often been hired to tackle difficult cases involving employee misconduct, commercial theft and fraud, and government corruption. One of his greatest achievements was in 2002 when he brought to light the sexual misconduct of the Arapahoe county clerk. That investigation led to a recall election and subsequent removal of the government official.

Today his business is more family oriented. His professional specialties include: child custody, parental kidnapping, restraining orders, grandparents' rights, domestic relations investigations, and personal surveillance. No matter what the job is, he says each one boils down to painstaking research, modern surveillance, and plain old-fashioned tenacity. This last characteristic can mean following "targets" day or night without been seen, as well as staking out homes for hours to monitor comings and goings. Rick underscores these activities in order to banish any illusions that private investigators always lead action-packed lives. "What we do is very difficult," he affirms, yet it can also be mundane.

For clients like Stephanie and Liz, Rick and his team of associates can help confirm or dispel their concerns, he says. For someone like Monica, a persistent P.I. can turn out to be a lifesaver—literally. For months, Monica and "Darren," her online boyfriend from Ohio, had been sharing messages back and forth. He boasted that he held a degree from a prestigious Midwestern university. He also said he had a Juris Doctor, and was now concentrating on his third postgraduate degree. He frequently e-mailed pictures of himself, and the photos showed a handsome athlete who enjoyed biking and swimming.

The only snag in their relationship was that Darren claimed to be deaf, and therefore phone conversations were impossible. Still, their long-distance romance bloomed through text and e-mail love notes. Before long, Monica was swept off her feet, and she excitedly made plans for her first real date with Darren. Their initial rendezvous was scheduled to occur at an airport. Shortly after Monica arrived, Darren sent a text message saying that something had come up, and that he had to cancel the meeting. When this happened time after time and despite

Darren's continued excuses, apologies, and gifts, Monica's doubts began to escalate.

That's when Rick entered the case. When he heard Monica's story, "I was more than just suspicious," Rick comments. After 23 years as a P.I., he knew what was wrong. Darren simply wasn't who he said he was. As the investigation unfolded, Rick was right. In fact, Darren turned out to be a hearing-impaired woman who had actually been stalking Monica for months. The stalker had recently moved to Denver from Ohio. She now exercised at the same gym Monica did, and she also had a job not far from Monica's home. Those pictures the woman had e-mailed were copied from a Web site. They were images of a military doctor who wasn't aware that he was part of an online scheme. "Stalking is a misdemeanor offense in Colorado," Rick states.

When he exposed the truth to Monica, she was both stunned and scared. The terrifying relationship ended in a sting operation in which Monica made new attempts to meet Darren, all the while pretending to be infatuated. During make-believe dates at Denver-area restaurants, with Rick and his associates secretly close at hand, the imposter was soon identified. Prior to each "date," the stalker would arrive early and inconspicuously set up her laptop. When Monica arrived, the woman would watch Monica undetected. By monitoring the restaurants' clientele and the woman's repeated appearances, Rick's suspicions were confirmed.

When Rick confronted "Darren" in person, the stalker was caught red-handed. "In my polite way, I made it clear that she had to knock it off," Rick says. That's when the stalking finally stopped.

Although this incident sounds wildly unbelievable, Rick disagrees. "I'm not surprised by anything anymore," he remarks. He goes on to talk about some of his other investigations. One involved surveillance of a respectable housewife who morphed into a pole dancer at night, which

was previously unknown to her surprised husband. Then there was the concerned daughter who hired Rick to investigate her mother's live-in boyfriend—a man who turned out to be a wanted criminal and a convicted felon.

Before he accepts each assignment, Rick always asks: "What are you going to do with the information?" If he hears or senses a potentially dangerous response, "I talk people out of hiring us," he says. "I spend a lot of time as a counselor."

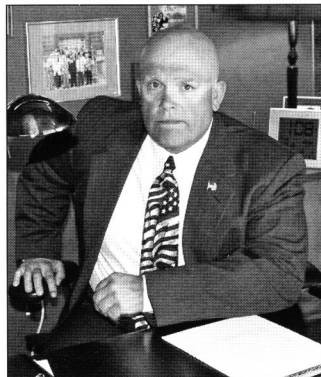
Rick also spends a lot of time as a teacher. Each fall and spring, Rick Johnson & Associates hosts the Private Investigators Academy of the Rockies, a professional training program that has been underway for the past five years. Rick explains that this is a "boot camp" for those interested in his line of work. It doesn't require a background in law or law enforcement. "I get a lot of writers, especially mystery writers and journalists," he says.

The 18-hour course entails written and research assignments, as well as job-simulation surveillance. In this part of the training, students choose a "target" (someone they don't know) to follow—perhaps an individual chosen at random at a shopping center. The trick is to shadow the target without being observed, whether on foot or in a car. Rick's students also learn these key facts of the trade: "You can get sued, you might have to testify in court, and you will have to write reports."

If you'd like to learn more about Rick Johnson & Associates, call 303-296-2200 or visit www.denverpi.com. **WE**

RICK JOHNSON & ASSOCIATES, PRIVATE INVESTIGATORS

By Jo Schantz



Rick Johnson, private investigator