

## **Private Eyes in Disguise**

### **Operatives: Crook-catchers work from the inside**

By: Erika Enigk, Correspondent

For most people, the phrase “undercover operative” conjures images of a tuxedo-clad James Bond drinking martinis and wooing beautiful women. Real life undercover work is far less glamorous, but catching the bad guy can be just as rewarding.

Many security operations are best left to law enforcement officers, because they require a high level of training or may require the use of a weapon. But civilians make idea operatives for certain types of assignments, according to Art Hannus, president and CEO of American Heritage Security in Alsip. The company offers a multitude of services, including expert witness testimony and security services as well as undercover investigations. It employs both civilians and law enforcement personnel.

*“You shouldn’t tell anyone that you’re an undercover operative. Even in your family. The fewer people who know, the better.”*

- Art Hannus, President and CEO of American Heritage Security in Alsip

Civilians are most often sent on assignments at companies with employees who are dealing drugs or stealing, Hannus said. An undercover operative will go into the company as an employee and work to expose the one who is breaking the law.

A civilian undercover operative can be placed in any job, so long as he or she is qualified to do it, Hannus said. He looks for people with diverse backgrounds and skill sets who can blend into different work situations.

“You want to make the person fit the job,” he said.

Day-to-day duties are not too exciting. Operatives simply report to work and do the job they’ve been assigned. If an operative is posing as a janitor, he or she works as a janitor for the duration of the assignment, which could be as short as a month or as long as a few years.

“If it’s done right, it’s supposed to be boring,” Hannus said.

To ensure the job is done right, the state of Illinois requires operatives to complete a 20-hour course (Hannus has one in-house for his own employees) and be registered through the agency by which they are employed.

However, Hannus advises those interested in becoming operatives to research any agency they are considering to ensure it is reputable. Some do not offer the

training and professional support that will keep operatives safe, he said. Agencies that are continually cited by the state or whose leaders are not well known might best be avoided, he said.

Hannus, a former Chicago police officer who has worked for more than 25 years in the private sector, is equally careful about who he hires. Although the state will allow people with criminal histories to work as operatives, he will not. And those who cannot follow strict instructions or have a taste for danger need not apply.

“You have to have the right frame of mind,” he said. “Anytime you’re dealing with criminals, you have to be cautious.”

All civilian operatives working for Hannus are supervised by former or current law enforcement officers so they don’t accidentally break the law. For example, a civilian operative is never allowed to handle illegal drugs under any circumstances and needs proper supervision and training to learn ways to avoid breaking the law – or their cover.

“Anyone doing an undercover operation must be supervised by law enforcement or they are going to run afoul of the law,” Hannus said.

Once the “bad guy” is caught, the operative moves on to another assignment, and many times, the company’s employees don’t even realize there was an operative there. Operatives could be called upon to testify once the person they’ve identified has been arrested. However, Hannus said his company’s methods have always avoided that.

“We get enough evidence that our guy doesn’t have to come forward,” he said.

In fact, no undercover operative working for Hannus has ever been exposed at all. “The good ones are so good that they’re never discovered,” he said.

The job depends on a person’s ability to keep quiet, Hannus said. Operatives at his company are instructed to speak only to their law enforcement officer supervisors about their assignments. They are not permitted to discuss their work with the person at their assignments who hired American Heritage. In fact, operatives are not even supposed to tell their spouses what they do.

“You shouldn’t tell anyone that you’re an undercover operative. Even in your family,” he said. “The fewer people who know, the better.”

Other than that, however, undercover operatives live as normal a work life as possible. They are encouraged to get involved in their work activities and even to make friends at their assignments. Many end up enjoying their assignments as much as their operative work.

“We’ve put people in some pretty interesting jobs,” Hannus said.

The monetary payoff can be nice, too. Just like “real” employees, operatives collect a paycheck from the company at which they’ve been assigned, as well as a paycheck from American Heritage.

“For a lot of people, they double their paycheck with one job,” Hannus said.