

Door-to-Door Deception By Sid Kirchheimer

Heather” came knocking on a noble mission: “She said she was a soccer player at Iowa State University and her team was collecting money to buy books for children in need,” recalls Harriett Summa.

The young woman who appeared at her door in May was well dressed, articulate and helpful. She asked if she could do any chores for Summa, and then changed a light bulb in the garage. Summa, 86, who lives near Des Moines, immediately got her checkbook.

Then Heather got pushy. “I first offered \$20, but she said, ‘Couldn’t you make it \$40? I have a quota I need to make,’ ” Summa says. “I figured I could afford it, so I wrote the check for \$40.”

Two nights later, the local TV news reported on a rash of door-to-door scams across central Iowa, all by a young woman falsely claiming she was an ISU soccer player seeking charitable donations—and duping dozens of people out of \$5 to \$120 a visit.

“I was furious,” Summa says. She got even angrier when she realized that Heather had given her a “donation receipt”—backdated to 2005—from Quality Subscriptions Inc., of Buford, Ga. Her donation was in fact for magazines she’d never ordered—and Heather had never even mentioned magazines. Quality Subscriptions is part of United Family Circulation, which has drawn more than 80 complaints nationwide to the Better Business Bureau (BBB) for falsely selling magazines door to door.

With a backdated receipt, Summa had no way to get a refund because federal law allows only three days to cancel a purchase from a door-to-door solicitor. (By law a salesperson must inform you of your right to cancel.) But Summa was able to freeze her \$40 check and change her bank accounts to avoid identity theft.

Complaints about United Family and its subsidiaries say their pitchmen misrepresent themselves as neighbors or students raising money for charities or scholarships. The company says it doesn’t condone or teach this approach in its training.

Consumer advocates say the salespeople are typically teens and young adults who themselves are sometimes victims of unscrupulous companies that lure them with false promises of money and travel but pay them little.

Magazines are often marked up 300 percent, and

“the odds are you’ll never get them, especially if you pay in cash,” says Phil Ellenbecker, an electrical engineer in Wisconsin who tracks door-to-door crimes on his website, www.travelingsalescrews.info.

Besides scamming people, Ellenbecker says, crews pushing magazines and other products have committed at least 280 felonies in recent years. Older people are most vulnerable. They invite salespeople in, he says, and when “the resident’s in the kitchen getting them a glass of water, the solicitor is stealing their medication, checkbooks and wallets.”

After a magazine salesman killed a 77-year-old New Jersey woman in 2004, her town adopted a law requiring criminal background checks for door-to-door solicitors. Such laws are being considered elsewhere, including Wisconsin. “Very little protection is afforded to

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individuals,” says state Sen. Jon Erpenbach, D. “My advice: Just say no from inside your locked door.”

If you have suspicions about a salesperson, contact the police and file a complaint with your local BBB or state attorney general’s office. To learn more, go to www.aarp.org and search on “Door-to-Door Scams” or the Federal Trade Commission (www.ftc.gov) and search “Magazine Subscription Scams.” □

Sid Kirchheimer is the author of *Scam-Proof Your Life* (AARP/Sterling Books).

