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Entertainment Features 02.15.07

## Private eyes

### Reporter DAVID WIRTH spies on the guys who get hired to spy on you.

If you notice a strange car parked in front of your house, you might want to watch what you do in your driveway. Especially if that car's windows are tinted dark and you're collecting disability checks.

GY Investigations is a private investigation company, one of at least 25 such businesses in the area, and it specializes in the defense of worker's compensation. That means they're looking to catch you if you're faking an injury so you can collect money from your employer's insurance company.

▼ADVERTISEMENT ▼ Gregory Yancey started the company in 1992 after a 14-year career with the California Department of Corrections. During his time with the prison system, the burly correctional officer escorted several high-profile prisoners, including Charles Manson, Sirhan Sirhan and Dan White, and helped break up a counterfeiting outfit.

During his career, Yancey would earn 15 letters of commendation and a lot of the experience that would qualify him for the private investigator license he received in 1992.

Working for Yancey is a team of field investigators he finds by posting fliers at local colleges, placing ads in newspapers and posting on classified ad Web sites. These investigators start the job making between \$12 and \$15 an hour and eventually can make up to \$25 an hour.

### The toughest part

Jermel Laurie, 25, has been a field investigator for GY Investigations since August 2005. He spends his days in the back seat of his car, watching the homes of suspected insurance cheaters.

Once parked in front of a subject's residence, Laurie observes and videotapes from behind deeply tinted windows for as long as 10 hours at a time. Breaks every four hours help, but the investigator says "the worst part is probably when

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Private investigators Jermel Laurie, left, and Gregory Yancey of GY Investigations in Salinas.

you've got to sit in your car for hours on end and nothing happens. It gets really tedious. The hardest part is staying focused and keeping your eyes on the house without getting distracted. I mainly listen to the radio just to keep my mind going. I'll get settled in, get comfortable and sit there all day."

Laurie endures the long hours of boredom in hopes of catching his subject in the act, whether that's gardening, painting the house or cutting down a tree. He's looking for evidence that his subject is not as badly injured as his disability claim states.

A confrontation with the subject occasionally interrupts the tedium. This happened once to Laurie when he first started the job.

"I was driving by the guy's house," Laurie said. "He was obviously real paranoid. He'd been watched before and knew that people watched him. He actually got in his vehicle and blocked me in at a curb. (He) just hopped out and started telling me he didn't want me around.

"I hadn't even set up yet," he said. "You just play stupid and let them be on their way, leave them alone. He took off and went back home. Now I never have to deal with that. I just come in stealth don't be seen, don't make any movements."

If it doesn't sound like these guys have the rough-and-tumble attitude of the private investigators you see on TV or in the movies, it's because they don't. GY Investigations' policy is always safety first.

If an investigator is spotted or confronted, he's supposed to pull off and go in the opposite direction.

Speeding is another no-no.

"If a person realizes that I'm following them and they want to go 90 miles an hour, I just let them go," Laurie said. "It could cause an issue with public safety."

### **Caught in the act**

The hours of surveillance finally pay off when the investigator sees a subject doing something outside the limitations of his supposed disability. GY Investigations' first fraud conviction came when investigators followed a Monterey County employee on full disability to an event where she was seen dancing to mariachi and swing music all night.

A more extreme instance is the case of an ex-felon who said he couldn't stand for more than a few minutes without getting dizzy. He was carrying some trays through the culinary section of the Monterey County Jail when he slipped and fell. Because he was working for the jail at the time, he was entitled to free healthcare until his release and workers' compensation benefits once he was out.

They followed the subject to Soledad, where he lived.

"(We) found him cutting (branches) up in a tree," Yancey said. "We actually watched him fall out of the tree. He didn't go down too far and he was back up cutting limbs and then jackhammering the sidewalk the same day.

"That one had me stumped," he said. "I really believed that I didn't have the right guy. I'm thinking, this looks like him, but does he have a twin?"

Once the private investigators at GY Investigations are satisfied that a subject is either faking the seriousness of his injury or legitimately incapacitated, they provide reports and documentation to the client (which is usually an insurance company for entities ranging from mom-and-pop businesses to city governments). Investigators also are available to testify in court if the need arises.

Since the company opened, GY Investigations has 72 assisted convictions. Yancey said a conviction could mean up to a year in prison and \$5,000 or more in fines. Additionally, you may have to repay your employer for medical costs and the cost of the investigation.

### **Trying to blend in**

During an investigation, field investigators will use whatever they can to blend in.

The most-used vehicles are white and gray jeeps with tinted windows. Investigators will also try to mix up their wardrobe and use spy-movie-type surveillance devices.

"We use concealment equipment, which could range from a baseball cap with a camera in it to sunglasses with the camera to the fanny packs," Yancey said.

They also use remote-controlled stationary cameras, which allow for surveillance without obvious pursuit if the subject leaves his or her

house.

Laurie said he likes the challenge of the job. It allows him to travel all over California in pursuit of subjects, but he says it isn't for everybody.

"(I've) trained a lot of guys that haven't been cut out for it," he said. "After a few weeks or a few months they get sick of it.

"Whether it's confronting people or just sitting out there all day, some guys can't handle it," he said. "I've trained some guys that wouldn't go into certain neighborhoods."

Laurie sometimes witnesses crimes while doing surveillance in some of the rougher parts of town.

"Maybe a fight every once in a while," the field investigator said. "You get suspicious activities. You know drug deals are happening and stuff like that."

According to Yancey, some of his field investigators have witnessed break-ins.

### **Perfectly legal'**

When asked about privacy issues, both Yancey and Laurie emphasized the fact that they work within the law.

"All the filming that we do is in public and it's perfectly legal, so I don't feel that there are any privacy issues," Laurie said.

He also said that the average citizen doesn't need to worry.

"If you have nothing to hide it's almost like you want your right to privacy if you're bringing a bad element into your neighborhood," Laurie said. "You have your right to privacy but does that infringe on anyone else?"

"With insurance claims specifically, people that are making these claims fraudulently are making everyone else pay," he said. "It costs you, it costs me, it costs everybody more money for insurance premiums because these people are lying."

**Originally published February 15, 2007**

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