

Removing the wool

Students learn hard way about being scammed by unethical business, individuals

BY MELISSA PANTANO
The Battalion

Last week two Madisonville women were arrested in connection with an Internet scam affecting people across the country. The scam was simple; the women posted an online auction for Beanie Babies and computer parts.

The victims were told to send money to a rented post office box in College Station but they never saw the items they purchased.

Scams such as this occur every day in the peaceful bubble of College Station. Students who work hard for their money usually are targeted, and some are not even aware they are being scammed.

Elizabeth McNeill, a senior agriculture economics major, said sometimes people take advantage of others' kindness.

"I was eating at a restaurant," McNeill said. "The server filled out the tip part of the charge slip and tipped himself \$10."

McNeill said that in the future, she will be more careful with her money.

"I feel like I have to keep all my receipts and check them with my credit-card statement to make sure I'm not getting ripped off," she said.

Rick Powell, a students' attorney with Student Conflict Resolution Services in the Department of Student Life, said he gets scam complaints every day from students.

"I have heard it all," he said. "Students get scammed by dentists, automobile dealers, landlords, people selling dogs, Internet scams, travel packages, etc."

Powell said there are ways students can protect themselves from scams.

"The most important thing is to find out exactly who you are dealing with," he said. "The easiest way to do that is to contact the Better Business Bureau and find out what kind of complaints have been made against the company. Another way is to find people who have used their services and talk to them."

Powell said students should thoroughly read every document they sign.

"Contracts get students in a lot of trouble," Powell said. "Make sure you read the whole thing before you sign anything."

Powell said that when students are trying to find out about potential landlords, they should talk to people who are current residents to find out about the practices of the residence's owner.

"Don't be afraid to bang on doors," Powell said. "Find out if the maintenance staff gets the job done. Look in the lease agreement for the return of your deposit. A lot of students only get a percentage of their money back and can't do anything about it because it was in the lease."

Tiffany Winkles, a junior poultry science major, said she learned that a good deal is not always what it seems.

"I bought a discount card from a salon in Bryan from someone who came to my door," Winkles said. "It cost like \$40 for 15 services, which sounded like a good deal at the time."

Winkles said she got into trouble because she did not take the time to read the fine print.

"The salesman didn't say that the certificate was only good for 60 days," Winkles said. "But we turned him in, and he got arrested. The thing that made me mad is that we were giving him our credit-card numbers without even thinking twice. I'm not as trusting now with people who come to my door."

Lisa Cantu, a senior nutritional sciences major, said she got scammed by people who approach most A&M students.

"This guy said he was selling magazines to help raise money for a scholarship," Cantu said. "I wrote



him a check [and] the check cleared, but I never got my magazines."

Cantu said that because of this incident, she now is more careful with people who come to her door.

"It really made me mad," Cantu said. "I'm not as naive with my money now."

Powell said the Department of Student Life offers conflict resolution and mediation at no charge to students who find themselves in these situations.

"The mediation services try to resolve the conflict through a neutral party without getting the courts involved," he said.

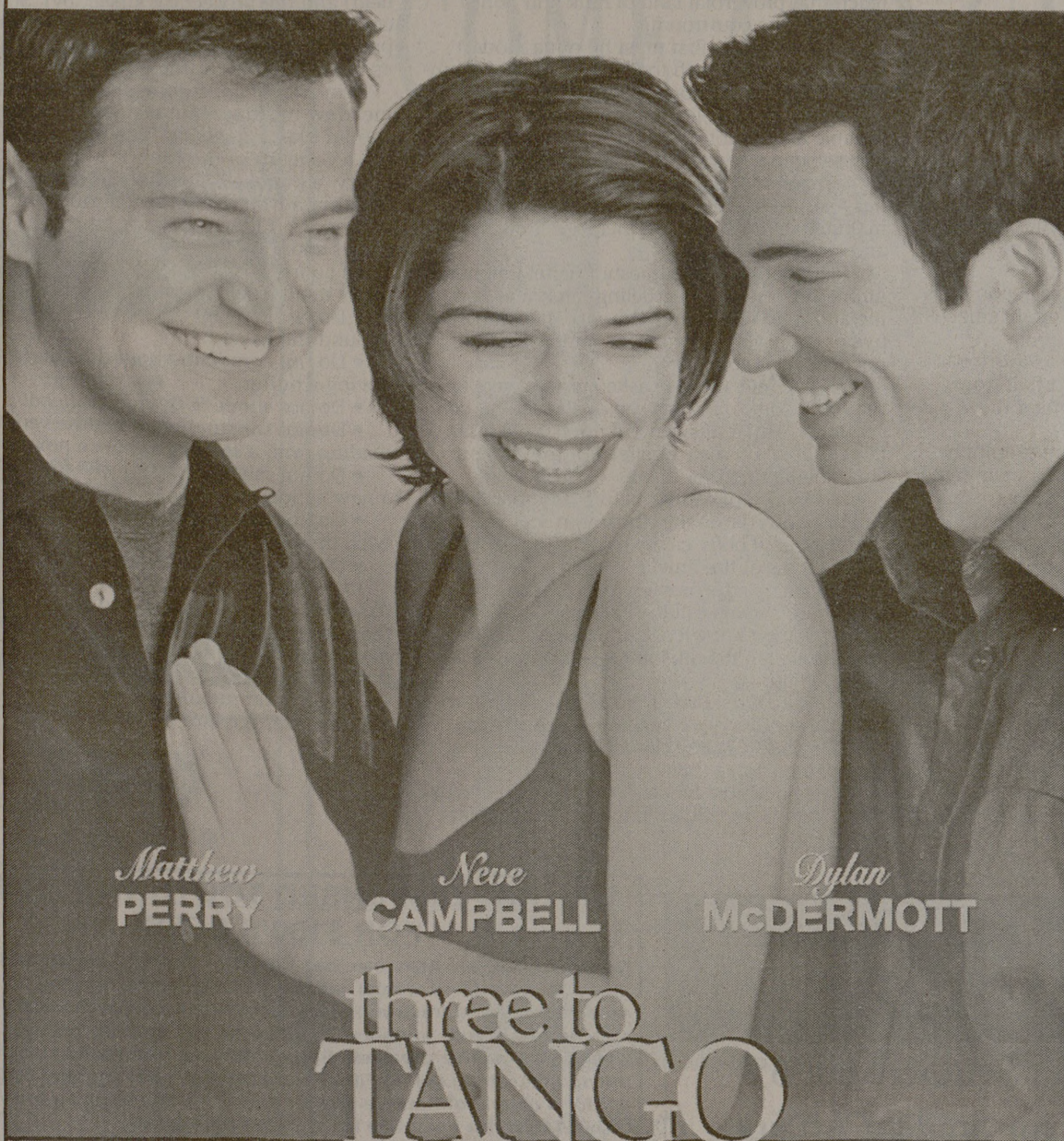
He said there is legislation that has been enacted to help protect students from scams.

"One of the defenses a student has against being scammed is the deceptive trade practices act," Powell said. "The act covers specific areas but can also be used broadly to recover damages from the scam."



GRAPHICS BY ROBERT HYNCEK/THE BATTALION

All's fair in the war of love.



Matthew PERRY

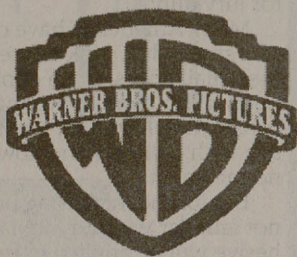
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