

Company recovers digital data

New business finds lost
e-mails, tax documents
and even photos

BY BRIAN MCVICAR
THE GRAND RAPIDS PRESS

GRAND RAPIDS — It's the call every photographer dreads making.

When Tavis Bratsburg accidentally deleted almost 900 photos he shot at a wedding in Ada Township this August, he had to tell the bride those memories might be lost forever.

"It was probably the worst telephone call I've ever made," said Bratsburg, owner of Kiwi Sun Photography in Byron Township.

"I put so much pride into my business and to tell her that it might be gone was a terrible feeling."



Michael
LaFeldt

But Digital Forensics Worldwide, a Grand Rapids-based business that works to recover everything from lost e-mails to tax documents, put the photos back in Bratsburg's hands.

"I remember my birthday wish was to recover the photos," Bratsburg said, noting he first asked another business to recover the photos before he contacted the bride. "I found out for sure they were recoverable on my birthday."

For Digital Forensics owners Dan Wells and Michael LaFeldt, digital recovery is just one of the areas in which their newly formed business specializes.

A licensed private investigator, Digital Forensics offers services ranging from examining cases of suspected workers compensation fraud to environmentally friendly hard drive shredding to preserving digital documents that eventually will be used in court cases.

"Someone may simply need an e-mail, found and we have to search through their employee's hard drive," Wells said. "Or someone might tell us their friend is missing, and we have to look through their computer (for leads)."

Digital Forensics was started in April, a little less than a year after the Legislature amended state law to require that computer forensic experts be licensed private investigators, LaFeldt said.

Since teaming up, he and Wells have worked with clients who have had e-mail accounts broken into, copied the hard drives of employees suspected of improperly using corporate

SEE DIGITAL, A15

DIGITAL WORK OFFERS CHANCE TO HELP

CONTINUED FROM A14

computers and tracked down stolen electronic equipment.

The company charges clients \$150 an hour for digital forensics work, such as copying a hard drive or searching for deleted documents. Typical private investigator work, such as attempting to track down a missing person, runs about \$75 an hour, and hard drives can be shredded for about \$4 to \$7 each.

Most of the business' clients are a mix of corporations and law firms, LaFeldt said. But some have just been West Michigan residents in need of a private investigator, he said.

One memorable example includes when Wells was contacted by a man who could not track down a friend who had been missing for several days.

After interviews with the woman's friends and family, Wells learned she frequently played "World of Warcraft," a popular computer game.

With the permission of her parents, he gained access to her computer, learned the name of the character she used while playing the game and sent her a message to contact her parents.

"I said, 'Hey, you've got to call your mom,'" Wells recalled. "She said, 'OK, you've got it.'"

Wells and LaFeldt each have a set of skills they bring to Digital Forensics Worldwide.

Wells, a 12-year veteran of the Grand Rapids Police Department, said he brings the

hard-nosed investigative tactics the company uses when examining cases of internal theft, substance abuse and employee misconduct.

He first worked as a private investigator after he left law enforcement in 2007 and formed Investigative Solutions. As a private investigator, he tracked down missing persons, performed surveillance and investigated claims of adultery.

LaFeldt said he brings the business sense and tech-savvy skills needed to dig through a computer's hard drive for deleted e-mails and other documents.

Before forming Digital Forensics, LaFeldt was the chief technology officer and president of Tribinium Corp., a now-defunct Hudsonville software developer that created a program to block access to Internet pornography.

"I've worked as a computer programmer, in one capacity or another, for the past 20-plus years," said LaFeldt, who earned a bachelor's degree in computer programming from Central Michigan University in 1989. "I bring the hard-core technology skills."

LaFeldt and Wells said they were drawn to the work because it gives them a chance to help people.

"The world is constantly changing," Wells said. "You have to learn to think outside the box."

E-mail: mcvicar@grpress.com