'Private' online photos really aren't

By WAYNE PARRY
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ATLANTIC CITY, N.J. -- It's not just Jersey girls who get tripped up by embarrassing Internet photos. Whether trying to become the next American Idol, Miss America, or just get an office job somewhere, people are starting to take steps to ensure that photos and personal information they post on the Web doesn't end up coming back to bite them.

The latest high-profile victim is Amy Polumbo, who was named Miss New Jersey last month, only to be hit with an alleged blackmail attempt by someone hoping to make her resign by threatening to release embarrassing photos of her.

The pageant board decided Thursday that the photos - which were in poor taste, but none featured any nudity - did not warrant stripping Polumbo of her crown.

"This was meant to be private," the 22-year-old told NBC's "Today" show on Thursday. "It was supposed to be between my friends and I."

But there's no such thing when it comes to photos posted online or e-mailed to others. Fellow Jersey girl Antonella Barba became worldwide news earlier this year when racy photos of the "American Idol" contestant surfaced during the competition.

"I used to say 'Cover your tracks,' but it really should be, 'Don't make tracks that need to be covered,'" Barba said Thursday. "Once anything is online, it's free reign.

"I feel so bad for her," said Barba, who has returned to college in Washington, D.C. to make up classes she missed while on the TV show. "I've been in the same situation she's been in. It disgusts me, people's interest in the dirt and trying to bring somebody down."

Polumbo's mother, Jen Wagner, said her daughter was just like millions of other young people who thought that just because their Facebook or MySpace page was set to "private," their photos would remain that way.

"They don't realize how many people can eventually see these photos," she said.

The photos of Polumbo came from her Facebook page, which has since been taken offline.
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Embarrassment isn't the only consequence of personal photos surfacing. Many employers troll social networking sites like My Space, Facebook and others when checking out a job applicant or keeping tabs on employees.

Steven Jungman, director of recruiting for Houston-based ChaseSource LP, told of a young woman his firm helped land a job with a company working on a sensitive project.

"This was a project that had to be kept secret, that if the competition found out about it or the media wrote about it before it was rolled out, it would be very bad for business," he said. "It even had a secret nickname.

"Every day, twice a day, the company did a ... search for that title, just to make sure nothing was getting out about it," Jungman said. "One morning, an interesting link came up, to someone's My Space page. It went, 'My name is so-and-so, I'm working on such-and-such for so-and-so.' And right next to that were photos that would make Anna Nicole Smith blush, and Paris Hilton go, 'Whoa!'"

Two days later, the woman was fired.

Other tales abound of job applicants getting passed over because their online pages showed them smoking marijuana, passed out after drinking, or flashing too much skin.

Theresa O'Neill, a career counselor at Rutgers University-Newark, urges students to take down their online photos while looking for a job.

"Think of it as being in a very large, public place like Yankee Stadium, taking the microphone and broadcasting your personal information to 50,000 people there," she said. "If you don't want everyone in the stadium to know the details of your personal life, then keep them to yourself."

At least some people are listening. A survey last year by the Web site CollegeGrad.com found that 47 percent of recent graduates had changed or planned to change their Web pages because they were looking for a job.

Barba survived on "American Idol" for a time after the photos of her began circulating, before being voted off by viewers.

She has steadfastly declined to speculate on how the photos of her became public and says she's not planning any legal action.

"I don't have the time and energy to go after someone the way they went after me," she said. "We just want to prevent this from happening to someone else."
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