

5 August 2008
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Isla MacKinnon

Suspect stories

By Linda Serck

Cameras cloaked in rucksacks and following adulterers to their den of iniquity - it's all part of 18-year-old Isla MacKinnon's daily job. Find out what one of the country's youngest private eyes gets up to in Berkshire.

"Just outside Reading I was sitting in a café for six hours watching the shop across the road.

"The gentleman came out and I followed him to the car park where he got into his car. At which point I jumped into my colleague's car.

"We followed him to a house, which wasn't his house, and we got some footage of him meeting somebody and they went off."

It turned out that this gentleman was the wayward husband his wife suspected him to be, and thanks to 18-year-old Isla MacKinnon the wife obtained the evidence she needed.

While this may sound like the stuff of fiction, it's all part of a daily job for Isla, a budding actress who's on a gap year before heading to university.



Isla can easily pose as both school girl and adult



"We have hidden cameras within vehicles or bags," she continues, "I've got a little rucksack and in the strap there's a little button which is actually a camera. So when I was following the guy in the café I can get all this footage of where he goes."

Part of Isla's success is that she "doesn't look like everyone's stereotypical view of a private eye". She's certainly not a teen in a trench coat.

In fact, it's because of Isla's youthful features that she's successful - posing as a 15-year-old school girl.

This leads to all sorts of jobs. In particular, that of a 'mystery shopper' wanting to purchase goods for over-18s only in Reading.

"The company, Answers Investigation, works with a programme called Challenge 21 which is all about working with the licence trade, sending mystery shoppers into shops to buy cigarettes and alcohol underage, and then seeing if you're asked for ID."



Isla MacKinnon as a school girl

Isla then reports back to store managers to let them know which staff members aren't checking for ID.

But the role of school girl doesn't end there.

"We often do undercover work," says Isla. "A couple of weeks ago I was undercover as a school girl talking to the coach of a swimming club in Berkshire.

"I was posing as a 15-year-old trying to join the club and we were having a chat and we were recording the conversation."

The coach, who was under surveillance for management issues, inadvertently gave Isla information which then helped out her client.

Isn't this a dangerous line of work for a teenager to be in?

"I'm never put in a dangerous situation," says Isla steadfastly. "We never have to do things completely on our own and if ever we didn't feel comfortable doing something we would just say 'no I'm not doing that'.

"We do have a couple of guys who work for the company who can come out if there's a situation that could possibly get a bit 'heated'".

Most of the work is done for business bosses who are keen to uncover corporate fraud or theft within companies.

"We followed a guy who'd come out of Reading County Court - that was a case of the gentleman being in court for allegedly stealing intellectual property from his company."

Isla's colleagues have in the past gone undercover at companies posing as employees, while other businesses suspect employees of unlawful absenteeism.



Isla MacKinnon as a school girl carrying booze

"A company rang up to say they've got an employee who's been off work for six weeks with a sprained ankle, and we've got some great photos of this guy working as a builder," says Isla.

She adds: "There was a guy off work because he'd hurt his back, so much so that he couldn't actually walk round his house. But then we saw him score a winning goal at a football match, which was rather interesting!"

Isla is one of the youngest private investigators in the country, and it's a job she clearly relishes.

"I'm not going to lie, it is really cool being able to say that you are a private investigator," she says.

"But there is more to it than just the glamour of being able to 'say' you're a detective. There's what you have to 'do' while being a detective, and it doesn't involve wearing trench coats and dark glasses and hiding around corners!"

last updated: 04/08/2008 at 15:47
 created: 04/08/2008

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