

## Web site Snopes.com aims to cut tall tales down to size

**Julie Hinds**

***Knight Ridder Newspapers***

Can garlic and oil of oregano treat anthrax?

Did Muhammad Ali make a crack about Hitler while visiting the World Trade Center?

Have seven women died from sniffing perfume samples sent in the mail?

No, no and no, assure Barbara and David Mikkelson, who are doing their part to soothe a frazzled nation.

The Los Angeles-based couple are the voices of reason behind Snopes.com ([www.snopes.com](http://www.snopes.com)), a Web site that serves as a clearinghouse for urban legends.

Since Sept. 11, Barbara, 42, and David, 41, have been sifting through the mountain of rumors spawned by the terrorist attacks. For the husband-and-wife team, making sense of half-truths and half-baked theories is a hobby and a passion.

"Believe it or not, this is what

“ This is part of how we deal with times of tragedy. Rumors reduce the unimaginable to something you can handle.

” we do for fun," says Barbara Mikkelson.

In recent weeks, Snopes.com has debunked several rumors, like the warning to stay away from malls on Halloween and the gossip that Osama bin Laden owns Snapple. The site has become so popular, it's drawn more than 2 million hits on some days.

So who are these amateur sleuths? He's a Web programmer. She describes herself as a housewife who devotes most waking moments to the site.

Appropriately enough, they met in a Web discussion group about urban legends. Six years ago, they started their own site.

On Snopes.com, the latest rumors of war are listed and color-

coded, with red dots for false ones, green dots for true ones and yellow dots for those still being scrutinized. Visitors can click each rumor to read the in-depth results of the couple's investigations.

To check the facts of a rumor, the Mikkelsons scour the Web and nearby libraries. Sometimes, they turn to government agencies or private businesses for help.

When the rumor surfaced that an Afghan man had warned his ex-girlfriend to stay away from malls on Halloween, they contacted the FBI's press office. They found out that an inquiry had been conducted and the story wasn't credible.

No hoax is too absurd for them. When an e-mail circulated urging women to strip naked and go outside to flush out offended terrorists, they used it as an opportunity to discuss the role of humor in tragedy.

Why has Sept. 11 spawned so many tall tales? Because urban legends are a reflection of society's fears and coping mechanisms.

"This is part of how we deal with times of tragedy," says Barbara Mikkelson. "Rumors reduce the unimaginable to something you can handle."

The mall rumor, for instance, made it seem as if you could stay safe by avoiding a specific place at a specific time. If only it were that easy.

"With terrorism, you feel so powerless because you don't know where or when the next attack is coming," she says. "That rumor was one way to take back that sense of control."

Although some people feel as if it's their duty to pass on rumors, Mikkelson advises taking a cautious approach.

"Sit on your hands and don't forward an e-mail five minutes after you get it," she says. "Take a little time to think about it first."

Or, better yet, send it to her for verification.

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