**Time names whistleblowers as Persons of Year**

Monday, December 23, 2002 Posted: 2:07 AM

**NEW YORK (CNN) --** **Time Magazine revealed a trio of female whistleblowers as its 2002 Persons of the Year on Sunday morning.**

Gracing the cover of this week's issue of the magazine are:

• FBI Agent Coleen Rowley, who called the bureau on the carpet for ignoring evidence hinting at the September 11 terrorist attacks.

• Cynthia Cooper, a WorldCom vice president who told the company's board of directors about nearly $4 billion in accounting irregularities.

• Former Enron vice president Sherron Watkins, whose memos warning company chairman Ken Lay about accounting irregularities failed to stop Enron's collapse.

Time, like CNN, is owned by AOL Time Warner.

In its introduction, Time said the three are "women of ordinary demeanor but exceptional guts and sense."

"What we saw in these three women was ordinary people from the heartland doing an extraordinary thing, which is telling the truth and telling the truth because they believed that telling the truth would improve, change, and redeem the institutions they loved so much," Time executive editor Priscilla Painton told CNN.

A CNN/Time poll released Sunday morning revealed that nearly six out of every 10 Americans see whistleblowers as heroes, a characterization Cooper rejected.

"I'm not a hero. I'm just doing my job," she told Time.

It was, however, a difficult job. "There have been times," she said, "that I could not stop crying."

Still, Cooper said she had a responsibility to do the right thing.

"I think it comes back to values and ethics that you learn through your life," she said. "There's a responsibility for all Americans -- teachers, mothers, fathers, college professors, corporate people -- to help and make sure the moral and ethical fabric of the country is strong."

A spokeswoman for WorldCom told CNNfn

the company is "very happy" Cooper was selected.

"We are proud of our internal audit team and the work they have done in the last year," the spokeswoman said. "Their courage is indicative of our 60,000 employees worldwide."

Like Cooper, Rowley -- who told the magazine she once wrote the producers of the 1960s television show "The Man from U.N.C.L.E." asking about how to join the spy organization featured in the show -- was a reluctant public figure. Her 13-page memo was never meant to go public.

When some retired agents compared her to convicted FBI spy Robert Hanssen, Rowley was hurt, but she never backed down.

"Loyalty to whoever you work for is extremely important," she told Time. "The only problem is, it's not the most important thing. And when it comes to not admitting mistakes, or covering up or not rectifying things only to save face, that's a problem."

Rowley, too, rejected the role of hero.

"If I jump into an icy river and save a child, and I am lucky enough to get out, then fine," she said. "I would hope that I would do that, but maybe not. Maybe I would be a chicken."

Watkins was rewarded for her information at Enron by being demoted to a "skanky office," she said. A cutting blow came when she was shown an e-mail from an Enron internal lawyer reminding executives that the law in Texas -- where Enron was located -- did not protect whistleblowers.

The e-mail was dated two days after her meeting with chairman Ken Lay.

"Talk about shoot the messenger. I can't believe they looked into firing me," she said. "It was a horrible response."

It's a response that is all too common, according to a CNN/Time poll. More than half -- 57 percent -- said they think whistleblowers face negative consequences at work most of the time.

But nearly three-quarters -- 73 percent -- said they believe they would follow the lead of Time's Persons of the Year and blow the whistle on serious criminal wrongdoing in their own workplaces.

Watkins said she enjoyed meeting Cooper and Rowley, and feel they have a lot in common.

"I think psychologists are going to have a field day," she told reporters. "The three of us are all first-borns, Christian women from small towns, so there are a lot of similarities that I think will be interesting to pursue."