



BCPO News

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Three Charged in Conspiracy to Defraud GoFundMe Contributors

Heartwarming tale involving homeless veteran was fabricated to elicit donations

Burlington County Prosecutor Scott Coffina announced today that the story behind an extremely successful GoFundMe campaign that raised more than \$400,000 to help a homeless veteran who performed an act of kindness for a stranded motorist was fictitious and formed the basis of a scam concocted to compel kind-hearted individuals to contribute to the cause.

The "Paying it Forward" GoFundMe campaign was created on November 10, 2017, soon after Mark D'Amico, the boyfriend of Katelyn McClure, took a photograph of McClure and Johnny Bobbitt Jr. standing in front of the Girard Avenue exit ramp on Interstate 95 in Philadelphia.

The campaign listed a target goal of \$10,000 to provide Bobbitt, who was homeless, with rent for an apartment, a reliable vehicle, and up to six months of living expenses, among other things.

During the two weeks following its creation, as the GoFundMe campaign gained momentum, Bobbitt, D'Amico and McClure undertook a media blitz repeating their story to print, radio, television and internet outlets – local, national and international – to perpetuate the myth and encourage additional donors to contribute.

"The entire campaign was predicated on a lie," Prosecutor Coffina said. "Less than an hour after the GoFundMe campaign went live, McClure, in a text exchange with a friend, stated that the story about Bobbitt assisting her was 'completely made up.' She did not run out of gas on an I-95 off-ramp, and he did not spend his last \$20 to help her. Rather, D'Amico, McClure and Bobbitt conspired to fabricate and promote a feel-good story that would compel donors to contribute to their cause."

D'Amico, 39, McClure, 28, and Bobbitt, 35, were all charged with Theft by Deception (Second Degree) and Conspiracy to Commit Theft by Deception (Second Degree). D'Amico and McClure, of Florence Township, surrendered last night and were processed and released. Bobbitt, of the Kensington section of Philadelphia, was also charged yesterday and remains incarcerated in Philadelphia pending an extradition proceeding.

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Bobbitt was located and taken into custody by members of the U.S. Marshals Service Fugitive Task Force in Philadelphia, the U.S. Marshal's Service New York/New Jersey Regional Fugitive Task Force - Camden Division, and the Burlington County Sherriff's Office Warrant Unit.

The investigation was conducted by the Prosecutor's Office Financial Crimes Unit and High-Tech Crimes Unit, with assistance from the Florence Township Police Department. The case will now be prepared for presentation to a Burlington County Grand Jury by Assistant Prosecutor Andrew R. McDonnell, supervisor of the BCPO Financial Crimes Unit.

The evidence developed over the course of the investigation revealed that D'Amico and McClure had known Bobbitt for at least a month prior to the date of the GoFundMe campaign's launch, as they had become acquainted with him during their frequent trips to a local gambling casino.

In total, more than 14,000 donors contributed nearly \$403,000 during the 2017 holiday season to help Bobbitt.

"All donors who contributed to this GoFundMe campaign will receive a full refund," said Bobby Whithorne, the company's Director of North America Communications. "We are fully cooperating and assisting law enforcement officials to recover every dollar withdrawn by Ms. McClure and Mr. D'Amico."

The investigation, which involved the review of more than 60,000 text messages and thousands of pages of subpoenaed financial documents, revealed that D'Amico and McClure spent the money on a BMW, a New Year's trip to Las Vegas and high-end hand bags, among other items. A breakdown of the cash withdrawals indicated that \$85,363 was withdrawn at, or in the immediate vicinity of, casinos located in Atlantic City, Bensalem, Philadelphia and Las Vegas.

Within a few months of the campaign's creation, all of the money had been spent.

"During one text exchange in March 2018, McClure lamented that the pair had less than \$10,000 remaining," Prosecutor Coffina said. "But D'Amico wasn't worried. He was certain the payday from the book deal they were pursuing would dwarf the money generated by the GoFundMe campaign. A few months later, when the dispute with Bobbitt became public, D'Amico was not dissuaded. Instead he pitched a title that would encompass the controversy: 'No Good Deed.'"

Once he realized the money had been squandered, Bobbitt took civil action against D'Amico and McClure. He alleged in August 2018 through his attorneys that he had only received approximately \$75,000 of the funds raised on his behalf, including an \$18,350 trailer purchased for him and parked at the home of D'Amico and McClure. The title was placed in McClure's name and was sold after Bobbitt left the residence.

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McClure and D'Amico averred that approximately \$200,000 was turned over to Bobbitt, but the investigation showed otherwise. An analysis of data derived from McClure's bank accounts revealed the campaign generated a net total of more than \$367,000 that was deposited into her accounts from November of 2017 through December of 2017.

From November 30, 2017 through March 26, 2018, there was \$189,375.00 transferred from her primary bank account into other bank accounts owned by McClure, and cash withdrawals of \$89,623.41, which totaled \$278,998.41.

"Fraudulent charity scams steal hard-earned money from donors and undermine the tireless efforts of the thousands of legitimate charities that are doing good work every day in this state," said Paul R. Rodríguez, Acting Director of the New Jersey Division of Consumer Affairs. "With social media providing users with images and stories of people in need, the urge to donate can become overwhelming. Unfortunately, there are always scammers looking to cash in on the kindness and generosity of others. We should not let the threat of scams dissuade us from giving, but would-be donors should take steps to protect themselves from those playing on their emotions for a profit. The Division encourages individuals to visit our website (<https://www.njconsumeraffairs.gov/>) for tips on avoiding charity scams, and to notify us of suspicious activity."

All persons are considered innocent until proven guilty in a court of law.

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