

LEADING THE NEWS



Lawsuits hit a Romney money man

By Alexander Bolton

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Former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney (R) has collected hundreds of thousands of dollars through the fundraising efforts of a supporter targeted by several lawsuits alleging child abuse.

In a lawsuit filed in the U.S. District Court for the District of Utah, 133 plaintiffs have alleged that Robert Lichfield, co-chairman of Romney's Utah finance committee owned or operated residential boarding schools for troubled teenagers where students were "subjected to physical abuse, emotional abuse and sexual abuse."



The complaint, which plaintiffs amended and resubmitted to the court last week, alleges children attending schools operated by Lichfield suffered abuses such as unsanitary living conditions; denial of adequate food; exposure to extreme temperatures; beatings; confinement in dog cages; and sexual fondling.

A second lawsuit filed by more than 25 plaintiffs in July in the U.S. District Court of the Northern District of New York alleges that Lichfield and several partners entered into a scheme to defraud them by operating an unlicensed boarding school in upstate New York. The suit does not allege physical or emotional abuse.

These are two active lawsuits against Lichfield. Several others suits have alleged child abuse on behalf of dozens of plaintiffs, but judges have thrown out the suits for procedural reasons. As a result, the merits of the allegations have not been weighed. In some suits, plaintiffs have settled their cases for undisclosed amounts of money.

The allegations could force Romney to re-examine his relationship with his Utah finance co-chairman or put pressure on him to give away the contributions Lichfield helped raise.

Lichfield helped to organize a February event in St. George, Utah, that raised about \$300,000 for the Romney campaign.

Romney has six finance committee co-chairmen in Utah. Since the beginning of 2003, Lichfield has given money to at least seven other Republican candidates and also to the National Republican Congressional Committee and Bush-Cheney '04 Inc.

Overall, Romney has raised \$2.7 million in Utah for his presidential campaign, far more than any other candidate, according to data compiled by the Federal Election Commission (FEC). Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) has raised the second most in the state, \$113,000.

"Mr. Lichfield is one of 6 Co-Chairman of our Utah finance team," said Romney spokeswoman Gail Gitcho in a statement.

"He has donated to numerous Republican candidates and committees. The Romney campaign will continue its policy to make our fundraising efforts as transparent as possible."

Lichfield did not respond to requests for comment made through the World Wide Association of Specialty Programs and Schools (WWASPS). WWASPS is his co-defendant in several lawsuits and Lichfield sits on its board of directors.

Plaintiffs represented by the Dallas-based Turley Law Firm claim Lichfield and WWASPS helped to run boarding schools where staff abused students and “acted in concert” to “fraudulently conceal the extent and nature of the physical, emotional, mental and sexual abuse occurring at its [member] schools,” their complaint states.

The plaintiffs include former boarding school students and their parents.

The president of WWASPS, Ken Kay, said in an interview the lawsuits are a ploy to get money and dismissed the credibility of former students making allegations.

“Most of them are ludicrous,” Kay said of the claims made against his organization and the boarding schools. “A certain percentage of the kids [who participate] are never going to be happy. They weren’t happy with public schools, they weren’t happy with law enforcement, and they have a long history of lying, fabricating and twisting the story around to their own benefit.

“Many of them have done poorly and have filed suits [since leaving the schools],” he added. “They have had problem with their families, churches, public schools and outpatient therapy. A large percentage of these kids have been [in] other treatment programs.”

The legal disputes shine light on the obscure world of boarding schools for troubled teens.

Years ago, parents set their troublesome teenagers to military schools. In recent years, boot-camp boarding schools, where staff emphasize discipline, have become popular. The schools affiliated with Lichfield and WWASPS fit this mold.

The parents suing Lichfield sent their kids to WWASPS-affiliated schools such as Cross Creek Center for Boys in LaVerkin, Utah; Majestic Ranch Academy in Randolph, Utah; and The Academy at Ivy Ridge in Ogdensburg after they got into trouble for insubordination, drug use or petty theft.

The parents learned of the boarding schools through Teen Help, a business owned by Lichfield that matched parents and their children with boarding schools around the country and in Mexico, Costa Rica, and American Samoa. Lichfield had consulting relationships with nearly all the schools, according to Kay. In some instances Lichfield rented property to the schools, said Kay, who did not name the properties specifically.

Plaintiffs have alleged that Lichfield made millions from the schools.

Former students allege they were transported against their will — sometimes in handcuffs — by operators such as Clean and Sober Solutions and Teen Escort Services to far-away locations.

Once at the boarding schools, they say they were subject to harsh treatment. Some students say they never attended classes and simply received books to read on their own without supervision. Others allege that staff at the schools threatened them with cattle prods and punished severely violations of school rules. Several students alleged in legal complaints that they were forced to lie face down on the floor for hours at a time, forbidden from moving their arms or legs.

Kay said WWASPS worked only with the schools and never had direct contact with the students. He also said only a very small percentage of former students have brought complaints.

Kay also said that the vast majority of former students never alleged abusive treatment.

A survey by The Hill found at least nine lawsuits filed in the last nine years against specialty boarding schools affiliated with Lichfield. Judges threw out more than half of the complaints because of procedural objections.

For example, a suit filed in Los Angeles Superior Court in 2005 on behalf of more than 20 plaintiffs was dismissed by a judge who found California did not have jurisdiction over the matter, according to Henry Bushkin, the plaintiffs’ attorney. Bushkin said he would gather more evidence to show a California court could hear the suit.

One of the lawyers making allegations against Lichfield is Thomas M. Burton, by his own account, a relative of Romney through marriage and a one-time friend of the ex-governor's late father, George Romney.

Burton said he has filed six unsuccessful suits against Lichfield. He said judges have thrown out his complaints because of various procedural difficulties.

Citing an example, Burton said one case could not proceed because his client, Clayton Bowman, a resident of the state of Washington, could not bear the psychological anguish of testifying about his experience at one of the WWASP-affiliated schools.

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