

Newport Beach ringleader of Ponzi scheme to plead guilty

BY HILLARY DAVIS

A Little Saigon pastor from Newport Beach is set to plead guilty to orchestrating a roughly \$33-million church-based investment scam.

Kent R.E. Whitney, 38, agreed to plead guilty to one count each of mail fraud and filing a false federal income tax return, according to a plea agreement filed Wednesday in U.S. District Court.

According to his plea agreement, Whitney ran the Ponzi scheme from September 2014 until April 2019 out of Church for the Healthy Self, which he founded and operated out of a Westminster strip mall.

The church appeared to have no sanctuary, according to court documents.

At Whitney's direction, church representatives appeared on television and at live seminars at church of-

fices to solicit investments in CHS Trust, the church's investment arm, and made several false or misleading claims, authorities allege.

They included guaranteeing an annual rate of return of 12%, guaranteeing a return of principal with no risk because CHS Trust was federally insured and boasting that the church's traders had not lost money in 15 years.

According to authorities, Whitney and his associates targeted the Vietnamese community by advertising on Little Saigon radio and television stations as well as on YouTube. The scheme identified at least 355 investors.

Investors sunk more than \$33 million into the scheme over the 4½ years, but in reality, little of that money went into any trading accounts, court documents state.

But Whitney directed that monthly statements

be sent to investors showing falsified reports of returns, authorities say.

Whitney also admitted that he filed a false federal income tax return in 2018 claiming \$17,539 in total income even though his true income was at least \$452,872, largely obtained through the fraud scheme.

The resulting tax loss was at least \$130,808, according to the plea agreement.

Whitney faces a sentence of up to 23 years in federal prison. He has a previous federal conviction for defrauding investors in a commodities scheme.

He had been released from prison a few months before forming Church for the Healthy Self.

The FBI investigated the case with the assistance of the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission.

hillary.davis@latimes.com
Twitter: @dailypilot_hd

AROUND TOWN

VOLUNTEERS stock pastries and dairy items at the Laguna Food Pantry in Laguna Beach.



File Photo

Laguna Food Pantry given \$85,500 in donations

The Ginny and Peter Ueberroth Family Foundation recently awarded the Laguna Food Pantry a \$20,000 grant to help supply essential groceries to families in need during the coronavirus crisis.

In addition, the pantry recently received \$25,000 through the OC Community Resilience Fund organized by the Newport Beach-based Orange County Community Foundation; two anonymous donations to-

taling \$40,000; and a \$500 grant from the Lalitha Veranasi Foundation Fund.

Ecological Society honors UCI biologist with fellowship

Joleah Lamb, a UC Irvine biologist who studies the impact of infectious diseases on the world's oceans, has been named an early career fellow by the Ecological Society of America.

Lamb, an assistant professor of ecology

See **Around Town**, page A5

CHAT LINE

Continued from page A1

ter was already at capacity.

"I was calling agencies that'd say, 'Let me give you a referral,' and I'd think, 'How do you think I got your information? It was from a referral,' " she recalled. "Aren't you supposed to be specializing in aging? What is going on?" That was my first inkling that there was a lack of resources, a lack of attention on seniors."

The I Did Something Good Today Foundation, formed in 2018, started with the Adopt a Grandparent program, in which volunteers commit to calling a senior citizen a few times a week as well as meet monthly for a group activity, often with tickets to events donated by concert venues, restaurants or sports teams.

One night she remembered that when she worked in the police department in her 20s, older folks often would call because they felt lonely. So she decided to start the chat line.

Lewis began with 10 volunteers recruited through VolunteerMatch. Less than a month later, she has almost 200.

The volunteers include two from Italy who are helping with Spanish-language calls, a group of expatriate mothers from London whose kids are still in the United States, and many from New York who are volunteering to talk to seniors in California even as their state has become a hot spot for the coronavirus.

She also has trained employees from Verizon's corporate social responsibility department, students from USC's Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work and members of the Red Cross' AmeriCorps program.

Laura Granados, an AmeriCorps member, heard a radio ad for GoldenTalk and contacted Lewis. Now, all 80 of this year's members plan to volunteer.

The AmeriCorps program engages adults in public service work with the goal to educate about disaster preparedness, which is extra important for seniors at this time, said Andrea Ritter, disaster program manager for the Los Angeles division of the Red Cross.

GoldenTalk also has a team of licensed therapists working as "love coaches" so volunteers can direct callers who need more specialized care to someone trained to, for example, talk someone through a panic attack or provide advice on how to cope with anxiety.

Lewis has recently started looking into incorporating delivery services.

She and her daughter Geniva Myricks drove from Los Angeles to Riverside on April 11 to deliver water, paper towels and toilet paper to a couple in their 90s.

"I don't ever ask anyone to do anything that I wouldn't do," Lewis said. "Whoever needs something, as long as we have it in



Courtesy of Kimberly Lewis

GOLDENTALK VOLUNTEER Rachel Woods-Oshiro, left, pictured with her grandmother, has been helping founder Kimberly Lewis coordinate the senior chat and crisis line's almost 200 volunteers.

stock and I can take a drive there, we will get it to them. I can't just sit by and have a 90-year-old couple unable to fend for themselves."

So far, Lewis is funding GoldenTalk entirely herself. Two corporate donations that were supposed to come the week Gov. Gavin Newsom mandated shutdowns of all nonessential businesses have been put on hold.

Telzio has donated its telecommunications platform during the pandemic, and the Collective in downtown L.A. has donated office space for a year.

But the foundation is ineligible for nonprofit grants because it is volunteer-based. "You have to have two or more employees," Lewis said. "But we don't operate that way because we didn't have the funds to start out that way."

Having recently quit her job at the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority to run her group full time, Lewis hopes to eventually have enough funding to provide housing for seniors. Combating social isolation is just the beginning.

"I think people are realizing it now that they've had to experience isolation themselves that human connection is real and does a lot of good," Lewis said. "It helps with cognitive abilities and happiness and all the things feeling loved and cared about does too. Those things are huge, and our seniors need that."

The GoldenTalk chat line number is (888) 604-6533. For information on how to donate or volunteer, visit ididsomethinggoodtoday.org/goldentalk.

ada.tseng@latimes.com
@adatseng

Advertisement

HELP SAFEGUARD YOUR TRANSPORTATION DOLLARS



APPLY TO THE OC GO TAXPAYER OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE

If you've always had a good eye for details, and live in Orange County's **Second** or **Third Supervisorial Districts**, we invite you to become a member of the OC Go (also known as Measure M) Taxpayer Oversight Committee.

With the passage of OC Go in 1990 and its renewal in 2006, an oversight committee was mandated by the Orange County electorate to keep a close watch on the transportation funds generated by the half-cent sales tax which is administered by the Orange County Transportation Authority.

As a member of the Taxpayer Oversight Committee, you will ensure the transportation projects specified in OC Go are built as promised.

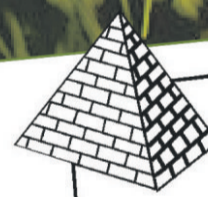
Currently, there is one opening for each of the Second and Third Supervisorial Districts on the 11-person committee. Orange County citizens living in these districts may apply to serve on the committee for a three-year term. Elected or appointed city, district, county, state or federal officials are not eligible to serve.

The Grand Jurors Association of Orange County (GJAOC) Taxpayer Oversight Committee Selection Panel is conducting the recruitment program and will screen all applications and recommend qualified potential candidates for membership.

For an application or more information, call (714) 264-8137 or visit octa.net/toc. Applications are due May 1, 2020. Please note that this is a volunteer position and no monetary compensation will be paid to committee members.

The Second District consists of the cities of Costa Mesa, Cypress, Huntington Beach, La Palma, Los Alamitos, Newport Beach, Seal Beach, Stanton, and portions of Buena Park and Fountain Valley. It also includes the unincorporated area of Rossmore.

The Third District consists of the cities of Orange, Tustin, Villa Park, Yorba Linda, and portions of Anaheim and Irvine. It also includes the unincorporated areas of El Modena, Fairlynn, North Tustin, Olive, Orange Park Acres, and The Canyons



Pyramid FENCE CO.

- Wood, Vinyl Fencing
- Straight Line Pickets
- Chain Link, Block
- Custom Masonry & Hardscape
- Barbeques, Outdoor Fireplaces
- Concrete, Stone, Patios & Walkways



Family owned and operated for over 50 years licensed, bonded and insured, Free Estimates Residential and commercial work

1111 BAKER STREET UNIT B, COSTA MESA, CA 92626

949-548-4422

WWW.PYRAMIDFENCECO.COM

CA Lic # 595701