

Yale Caught Up In Con

Police: Green Card Scam Was Run From Law School

By DAVE ALTIMARI
Courant Staff Writer
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Ralph Cucciniello has claimed to be several things in what authorities call a long history as a scam artist - a television producer, a psychologist, even a nursing home operator.

But investigators say it took a phony affiliation with Yale for Cucciniello to really hit pay dirt. Posing as a law professor with an expertise in immigration law, they say, Cucciniello has scammed hundreds of undocumented workers from Ireland into thinking he could secure them a green card - for a \$5,000 fee.

Law enforcement officials in New York and Connecticut are scrambling to find all his victims and answer a nagging question: How did a scam artist who once was in the federal witness protection program secure office space in one of the most prestigious law schools in the country, as well as a school identification card and e-mail address?

"The word went out in the Irish community all across the country that there was this attorney at the Yale Law School who had found a loophole in the immigration laws and could get you a green card quickly," said Inspector Timothy Reardon of the New Haven State's Attorney's Office. Reardon opened an investigation into Cucciniello a few weeks ago when New York City police arrested Cucciniello on charges of grand larceny and impersonating an attorney.

New York police were alerted to the alleged scam by private investigator Olwyn Triggs, who was contacted by a couple of Irish immigrants after they paid Cucciniello and didn't get a green card.

Cucciniello, 55, was charged in only a few cases in New York because law enforcement officials believe the majority of the crimes occurred in Connecticut, on the Yale campus.

Irish immigrants flew in from all over the country to New Haven to bring Cucciniello cash, Reardon said. They often just walked into the law school and met with Cucciniello in an office inside the building. Others sent him bank checks through the mail to a Yale post office box.

"This never could have been pulled off without the credibility of him being part of the Yale Law School," Reardon said. "People literally sat in what they thought was his office in the law school and handed him cash."

The Yale Law School released a statement Friday saying that Cucciniello was never a paid employee of the law school, although it acknowledges he did have access to the school as a volunteer.

"Ralph Cucciniello is not now, nor has he ever been, a paid employee or staff member of Yale Law School. Apparently, he has on occasion served as a volunteer research assistant for a particular professor at the Law School, in connection with that professor's non-Law School activities," the statement said. "Mr. Cucciniello has never had any relation to the Law School's immigration law clinics, and he has not been authorized by the Law School or the clinics to undertake any activities or to represent any clients. Upon learning of his arrest, the Law School suspended his access to all Law School facilities."

Yale officials declined to name the professor that Cucciniello apparently worked for but sources familiar with the investigation said it was Steven B. Duke, who could not be reached for comment Friday. Duke, who teaches a class called "Convicting the Innocent," teaches and writes on criminal law, criminal procedure, evidence and drug policy, according to his law school biography. He has been at the law school since 1961.

Cucciniello apparently met Duke through the attorney's work on the case of New Jersey mobster Martin Taccetta. Duke has represented Taccetta over the past seven years in his efforts to get released from a life sentence for the 1984 murder of a mob-connected contractor in Ocean County, N.J.

Duke claimed that Taccetta was falsely convicted, because prosecutors were aware of an FBI memo that indicated Taccetta was nowhere near the murder scene. Cucciniello submitted a personal affidavit on Taccetta's behalf, according to Cucciniello's former attorney in New Jersey, Jay Surgent.

Cucciniello, who lives in a house along the Branford River, has a colorful past.

Court records show he was convicted in Passaic County, N.J., in 1996 for bilking several people, including the mother of a woman he ended up marrying briefly and a priest, out of at least \$250,000. Cucciniello convinced people he was building condominiums and needed seed money that he never paid back.

But even though Cucciniello was sentenced to 30 years in prison in the New Jersey case, it appears he never served time.

That's because he was an informant for the federal government and was placed in the federal witness protection program.

It's unclear why he went into the program, although Surgent told the Newark Star-Ledger in 1996 that Cucciniello had once saved the life of an FBI agent and that the federal government considered him "very valuable."

Surgent said Friday the feds always looked out for Cucciniello, and he wasn't surprised to learn that Cucciniello had gotten into trouble again.

"Ralph is a very intelligent guy. He liked to live other people's lives and had allegedly

misrepresented himself to a whole variety of people in order to get their money," Surgent said.

Cucciniello also was convicted of fraud in Santa Barbara, Calif., in 2003 and sentenced to three months in prison, although it's unclear whether he ever went to jail.

Authorities have identified more than 200 victims in the Irish green card scam but believe that's just the beginning. Many of the victims are illegal immigrants and may be hesitant to file a complaint for fear of getting deported.

Reardon said that any victims who come forward will not have their names turned over to immigration officials.

"These people are victims and we need their help in this case," Reardon said.