

Boston Financier Steps In to Bail Out Illegal Immigrants

Textile-Factory Raid Spurred Him to Act; 'Un-American' Images

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NEW BEDFORD, Mass. -- One frigid March morning last year, federal agents raided a factory in this old whaling town, arresting hundreds of illegal immigrants as they sewed vests and backpacks for U.S. soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Most were shackled and sent to a detention center in Texas, where they faced rapid deportation unless they could post thousands of dollars in bail -- money they didn't have -- to buy time to mount a defense.

Then, a mystery benefactor appeared. The anonymous donor ponied up more than \$200,000 to spring 40 people from detention.



Robert Hildreth

The payments, which until now haven't become public despite extensive news coverage of the raid itself, came from Bob Hildreth, a Boston financier who made his millions trading Latin American debt. He was "infuriated" at the televised images of workers being shipped to Texas, he says. Helping them make bail is "payback."

The raid broke families apart," says the diminutive 57-year-old, who once taught high-school history. "This was extremely un-American."

In the annals of philanthropy, donations of bail money are unusual. They are also risky for the giver. While none of his recipients have skipped out on bail, it is a real possibility, since the chances of winning the right to remain legally in the U.S. are slim. Bail-skippers would open Mr. Hildreth to criticism that he helped people evade the law.

"He's going to hear that he's helping these people stay here who have no right to stay here," says Harvey Kaplan, a Boston immigration lawyer who represents some of the immigrants. "He'll get hate mail."

Most of the people whom Mr. Hildreth helped bail out did enter the U.S. illegally, their lawyers acknowledge. The question will be whether they can claim political asylum or make other arguments to win the right to stay.

The factory raid has been a hot topic around New Bedford, where prominent local talk-radio host Ken Pittman has taken a strong stance against illegal immigration. Upon hearing of Mr. Hildreth's payments, Mr. Pittman said: "I would ask him to show the same compassion for American workers displaced by these illegal aliens."

A spokeswoman for Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the federal agency that staged the raid, declined to say whether it knew who posted the bail. She said any person is free to post bond for anyone.

Mr. Hildreth is a multimillionaire who built his fortune trading in Latin American bonds during the 1980s debt crisis that gripped the region. "I love making money," says Mr. Hildreth, who recently traded in his 20-year-old Volvo for an orange Mini Cooper.

He also professes a lifelong love affair with Latin America. As an economist with the International Monetary Fund, he lived in Bolivia in the 1980s. Later, after returning to the U.S., he began trading in Latin American loans at Wall Street giants including Drexel Burnham Lambert Inc. He now runs his own small firm, International Bank Services, which buys and sells corporate debt.

The descendant of Irish immigrants and of Puritans who settled in Boston in 1632, he twice tried his hand teaching, following in the footsteps of his parents, both of whom were teachers. Both times, however, he returned to finance.

A Key Moment

A key moment, he says, was a verbal spat with a student over abuse of bathroom-pass privileges. "After four months teaching, I found out I stunk at it," he says. "I'm an investment banker."

Instead, he decided to use his money to improve education for immigrants. Over the past two decades, he says, he has given several million dollars to fund literacy and citizenship classes in Lynn, Mass., to build a preschool in an immigrant-heavy Boston neighborhood, and to set up an endowed chair in Latin American studies at the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University.

The factory raid last March was one of the largest in the nation in recent years. A total of 361 people were arrested. Some were detained on the East Coast, but most were dispatched to Texas, home to particularly tough immigration judges.

The factory's former owner, Francesco Insolita, was arraigned in August in federal district court in Boston on charges of harboring and recruiting illegal immigrants. Efforts to reach Mr. Insolita's lawyers were unsuccessful yesterday. The factory is now under new ownership.



Associated Press/File
Maria Escotto shares a moment with her daughter at Our Lady of Guadalupe church on March, 9, 2007. She was detained in the immigration raid on the Michael Bianco factory on March 6.

Images of shackled prisoners stumbling as they boarded a plane for Texas are what spurred Mr. Hildreth to call Greater Boston Legal Services, a nonprofit group coordinating a legal response to the raid. "I told them to contact me if they had some bonds that needed to be paid," he recalls.

Nancy Kelly, an attorney at the group, says: "It was almost too good to be true."

Mr. Hildreth agreed to help individuals post bail if they or their families would also put up a significant chunk of money. The legal-aid group, GBLS, would email Mr. Hildreth with individual requests. He would then wire the money back to the lawyers.

Last May 3, for example, GBLS attorney John Willshire-Carrera sent Mr. Hildreth an email that read: "Bob, we have two more for tomorrow, if possible....Bond set at 5,000, family is paying 2,500. Bond set at 7,500, family is paying 2,000."

The following morning, Mr. Hildreth emailed his response: "8k sent."

Mr. Hildreth says the \$200,000 tab "ended up being much more than I thought it would be."

\$28,000 Bail

Typically in cases like these, bail is set somewhere between \$1,500 to \$7,000, although the number can be much higher. For instance, bail for one detainee, Luis Lopez, was set at \$28,000 by a judge who is known for particularly high figures.

"It took me a little while to get my mind around that one," says Mr. Hildreth, who contributed \$23,000. Mr. Lopez's family paid \$5,000.

At an event earlier this month in New Bedford to mark the anniversary of the factory raid, hundreds of immigrant families gathered to offer support. Many are Guatemalans of Mayan descent; party-goers sipped cups of hot milk and rice, a traditional Mayan drink.

"What's this?" asked Mr. Hildreth when someone handed him a cup.

The last person to benefit from Mr. Hildreth's help was also the last person on the factory floor during the raid. Manuel Perez, who is deaf, was working on a double-needle sewing

machine. He was oblivious to the commotion unfolding around him until he finally noticed that his co-workers were "hiding behind boxes," he recalled recently.

"I am happy to be back with my family," he added, now back in Massachusetts after getting bailed out in Texas. "I hope to get a work permit."

So far, two cases involving Mr. Hildreth have been resolved, according to the legal-aid group. One person decided to seek asylum in Canada and another accepted voluntary removal to Guatemala.

Mr. Hildreth recently was told that, once cases like these are resolved, the bail money gets returned to him. So he plans to set it aside as a bail fund for future cases.

"I had no idea the money would come back," he says. "I had never bailed out anybody in my life."