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WHO IS THE REAL SCOTT WOLAS?

Accused Quincy con man 'sounds heartless,' says retired FBI agent

Patrick Ronan; The Patriot Ledger

QUINCY In Manhattan, he was a hot-shot attorney known for his love of art, his trips to the tropical island of St.

Maarten and his connections to the liquor business.

In Florida, he was a savvy securities broker who left big tips at restaurants and one time paid for a charter flight to send his business associates on a getaway to a casino.

And most recently, in Quincy, he was a star real-estate salesman who charmed co-workers with gifts, like tickets to a Justin Bieber concert, and wowed colleagues with his intellect.

Everywhere he went, Scott J. Wolas - known by at least five aliases including Allen Lee Hengst and Eugene Grathwohl - was out to impress. But he seemingly had only one true mission while skipping around the U.S. over the past 20 years: Win over people's trust, take their money, then disappear.

"It's a game to him," said Barry Ranew, a retired insurance agent who says he was bilked by Wolas more than 15 years ago in Central Florida.

Wolas, 67, a fugitive who has evaded capture since 1996, is wanted on charges of larceny, embezzlement and identity fraud out of Quincy in what police said were "Ponzi-like" schemes including one involving the redevelopment of the former Beachcomber nightclub across from Wollaston Beach.

Wolas's alleged schemes in Quincy, which fooled at least 16 victims to the tune of almost \$1.7 million, are the latest in a line of ploys that date back to the 1990s in New York where he allegedly swindled more than \$100 million from investors using a liquor-trading pyramid scheme.

A number of local residents are saying that Wolas, who went by the alias Eugene Grathwohl in Quincy, sounds like someone straight out of a novel or Hollywood film. Wolas' pattern of deception is reminiscent of Leonardo Di-Caprio's character in the 2002 film "Catch Me If You Can," based on the real-life imposter Frank Abagnale.

Wolas, last seen two weeks ago being dropped off at the JFK/UMass MBTA stop, still hasn't been caught - much to the surprise of James J.

Wedick, a retired FBI agent who ran the corruption and white-collar crime unit out of Sacramento, Calif. Wedick said in today's digital age with better surveillance and cellphones it's strange Wolas has evaded capture this long.

"He's pushing his luck," Wedick said.

Wedick said Wolas seems to crave attention, is an adrenaline junkie and doesn't fear being caught, all quintessential traits of a con artist.

"They love living on the edge, seeing if they can pull it off and not get caught," Wedick said. "The FBI and law enforcement agencies are just occupational hazards to them. Most of them think they're smarter than the rest of us, and they can talk their way out of everything, because that's what they do for a living." Wedick said Wolas matched the description of most white-collar swindlers, most of whom are charming, sociable, smart and articulate. He said experienced con men typically plan their next identity ahead of time and "baby and nurture" it by building a credit history long before they assume it.

"If you've got an identification and you can convince a bank to open up an account and you have a credit card, you're good to go," Wedick said.

Robert Long, a retired State Police detective from Norwell, said that people with money can easily acquire fake identifications and remain hidden from law enforcement.

Long, who was the first witness for the prosecution in the James "Whitey" Bulger trial in 2013, said con artists prey on the gullibility of their victims.

Wolas' victims over the years include family, two longtime girlfriends and friends with whom he shared Thanksgiving dinner.

"They have absolutely no conscience taking advantage of people," Long said. "But people have a desire.

(Wolas) made them feel it was a sure deal, and they wanted to get in on it.

They just want to believe it. They don't want to think it could be a fraud." But Long said skepticism is the best protection, and investors need to do their research and make sure people are who they say they are.

'A very intelligent guy'

Wolas' former associates and past national media reports have said the alleged con man used identities of real people, either former roommates or people he knew were dead.

Quincy police Capt. John Dougan said there are no licenses or passports on record for either Wolas or Grathwohl.

But he said that doesn't mean Wolas doesn't have other IDs on him under different names.

Residents on Warwick Street in Quincy, where Wolas had lived with his longtime girlfriend, said he kept a low profile. They said they never saw him driving his own car; he was always being picked up or dropped off by cabs.

Dougan said police are looking into whether Wolas used the same cab driver over the years.

Besides creating new identities, con men also practice patience when wooing potential investors, law enforcement experts say. In New York, Florida and Quincy, Wolas first established legitimate careers, achieving success and gaining credibility in each role. In New York, he was a partner and a leading litigator for the national law firm Hunton & Williams.

Christopher Hein, one of dozens duped in Wolas' liquor-trading scheme in the 1990s, said he only met Wolas once or twice, describing him as "a very intelligent guy" who spoke multiple languages, including Russian, and who studied art.

Wolas reportedly helped lure investors by bringing them to his Manhattan law office, giving his plan an air of legitimacy.

"He had a big job at Hunton & Williams," Hein said. "He conducted his business in there, inside a beautiful office." Wolas was disbarred in 1997 after allegations surfaced of his fraudulent activities.

In Florida, Wolas re-emerged under new aliases and with a new profession as a securities broker who delivered on early investment deals before presenting the bigger con, which in Florida turned out to be investing in gold-mine leases.

"He's just that convincing when he talks to you," Ranew, the retired insurance agent in Florida said. "You just believe he's telling the truth, and you're just happy he's willing to include you in some of the success." About seven years ago, Wolas (pretending to be Grathwohl) took classes and passed the test to become a licensed real-estate agent. Wolas, known for his large appetite for food and booze, has been described as gregarious and "eccentrically lovable" by many of his former co-workers and business associates. They said he spoke Mandarin and claimed to be fluent in Arabic.

About five years ago, Wolas became a member of The Neighborhood Club in Quincy, a prestigious members-only club he would visit two or three times per week to hold business lunches.

"He was the nicest guy in the world, very generous," Wendy McEachern, assistant manager at The Neighborhood Club, said.

But Wolas didn't impress everyone.

Rick Murray, a real-estate broker with Keller Williams Realty in Braintree, said he and Wolas shared lunch about five years ago to talk business.

"I felt like I was looking into the eyes of a strange cat," Murray said. "I just didn't believe anything that was coming out of his mouth. He was building himself up for no reason." 'Over-the-top charming'

In recent years, Wolas became interested in buying, developing and selling his own properties. He built and sold two condominiums on The Strand, a narrow, V-shaped street behind the Beachcomber.

About a year ago, he met with Mayor Thomas Koch in city hall to discuss his development plans for the Beachcomber. Koch described the man he thought was Grathwohl as "over-the-top charming," and the mayor said he had no reason to believe he was hiding anything.

"He was very respectful, he presented well, and a local Realtor had brought him in. Everything seemed to be in order, from my perspective," Koch said.

Wolas had made a \$500 donation to Koch's campaign fund under the Grathwohl name. Koch speculated that perhaps Grathwohl was hoping a donation would help his Beachcomber plan win favor from the city when it went before the various regulatory boards for approval.

But the Beachcomber deal died last week after Wolas disappeared, leaving behind yet another trail of

severed relationships and unpaid creditors.

Wedick, the former FBI agent who has seen his fair share of criminals, said Wolas has "burned" more people than most con men on the run.

"This sounds like a heartless bastard," Wedick said.

Reporter Chris Burrell contributed to this story. Patrick Ronan may be reached at pronan@ledger.com or follow on Twitter@PRonan Ledger.

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