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Inside C2

Southern DAILY

Make Today Different

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Decorated veteran at center of U.S. fraud charges on border-wall fundraising



FILE PHOTO: United States Air Force Senior Airman Brian Kolfage Jr., a triple amputee who lost both his legs and an arm while serving his second deployment in Iraq in 2004, attends the Veterans Day parade on 5th Avenue in New York, U.S., November 11, 2014. Picture taken November 11, 2014. REUTERS/Mike Segar

(Reuters) - Brian Kolfage lost both legs and his right hand in a 2004 rocket attack in Iraq. He earned a Purple Heart and became known as one of the most severely injured U.S. service members to survive the war. It was this reputation as a war hero - showcased particularly in conservative media - that helped him raise \$27 million for President Donald Trump's promised "wall" on the U.S. southern border, a centerpiece of Trump's 2016 presidential campaign.

Now Kolfage is one of four defendants, including former presidential adviser Steve Bannon, named in a federal indictment alleging the group secretly diverted hundreds of thousands of dollars for their personal use. The indictment was unveiled in New York Thursday.

Last year, Kolfage told Reuters that his wall initiative stemmed from a desire to bolster American security amid an onslaught of immigrants from Mexico. "As citizens of our country, it's our duty to do what's right," the former airman said.

At the time, Kolfage, 38, said his team had coordinated closely with the White House. Trump associate Kris Kobach - a former Kansas Secretary of State and attorney for Kolfage's organization - briefed the president regularly on the effort, Kolfage said.

Kolfage made a seemingly patriotic promise not to "take a penny" from the wall venture. But U.S. attorneys from the Southern District of New York said in their indictment that the pledge was actually cover for a fraud and money laundering scheme that appealed to credulous donors with a story of Kolfage's "sainthood."

"Some of those donors wrote directly to Kolfage that they did not have a lot of money and were skeptical of online fundraising, but they were giving what they could because

they trusted Kolfage would keep his word," the indictment says.

Kolfage and Kobach did not respond to calls or messages seeking comment. Kolfage's lawyer also declined to comment, saying he was still gathering information about the charges.

Upon leaving court in Manhattan on Thursday where he pleaded not guilty to the charges, Bannon told reporters the indictment was a "fiasco" meant to thwart efforts to build a wall. Reuters was unable to reach him separately. The other two partners, Andrew Badolato and Timothy Shea, were released on bond. They did not return calls and emails seeking comment. A public defender in Florida who represented Badolato at the hearing declined to comment.

Trump told reporters Thursday that from what he had read about the wall venture, he "didn't like it" and sought to distance himself from those charged. A White House spokesperson told Reuters Thursday that it had nothing to add to the president's comments.

Americans all over the country poured money into the wall project, including Benton Stevens, an 8-year-old Texas boy who set up a hot chocolate stand and website to raise funds in early 2019. Stevens donated approximately \$28,000 to Kolfage's effort, according to his parents, and he helped cut the ribbon on Kolfage's first completed wall project.

Jennifer Stevens, Benton's mother, said in an interview with Reuters on Thursday that Kolfage's enterprise had seemed "pretty legit," and it would surprise her if the charges against Kolfage were true.

"Of course, Benton doesn't know any of this and we probably won't let him know about the latest news, because I don't want him to think his efforts were - you know, he's 8," she added. The wall venture was not the first - or the last - instance in

which Kolfage used his military record as a marketing tool and encountered controversy.

He became steeped in right-wing politics after his return from Iraq and helped launch conservative news sites. His social media posts - including false claims that President Obama's birth certificate was fake - led Facebook in 2018 to ban him for breaking its rules against "coordinated inauthentic behavior," a Facebook spokeswoman told Reuters in 2019.

In an appearance on Fox News opinion host Laura Ingraham's show, Kolfage complained that he was being treated unfairly by Facebook. "I sacrificed three limbs for everybody, for your freedom, for your families' freedom," he said. He also promoted a GoFundMe campaign that raised \$600,000 for Brett Kavanaugh during his contentious Supreme Court nomination. Judicial ethics guidelines prohibit justices from accepting such donations, and in the end the money was not sent to Kavanaugh. The group said they would give the money instead to the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Washington, D.C., and some donors withdrew their pledges.

At the end of 2018, the archdiocese told Quartz it had received just over \$320,000. The archdiocese did not return a request for comment on Thursday.

In March, as the COVID-19 pandemic spurred worldwide shortages of protective medical gear, Kolfage told Reuters he had launched a business called America First Medical to find and sell scarce face masks and tests to the U.S. government and hospitals. He said his goal was to prevent price gouging and scams. The prices for the masks he sold were steep, but he said they were lower than other vendors' and he would receive only modest commissions.

"Our sole mission in this whole thing is supplying American citizens with the equipment they need," he said, lamenting that the federal government had not responded to his mask offers, including pitches on Instagram.

'SEVEN FIGURES'

Kolfage was born in Detroit and grew up in Hawaii, according to his website. In Iraq, he was nearly killed in the rocket attack on Sept. 11, 2004. He ultimately moved to Arizona and married Ashley Kolfage, who describes herself on Instagram as a model.

Initially, Kolfage was celebrated by members of both parties. In 2012, he attended President Obama's State of the Union address as the guest of then-U.S. Representative Gabrielle Giffords, a Democrat.

He told Reuters in the 2019 interview that he had earned "seven figures" by creating popular conservative websites such as Freedom Daily, profiting from advertising revenue, and then selling them. Reuters was unable to verify Kolfage's claim about his earnings.

In December 2018, Kolfage launched a fundraising campaign on the GoFundMe platform called "We the People Build the Wall," promising to turn over all money to the federal government. The appeal immediately attracted a flood of donations, aided by attention from Fox News and other media.

Facebook removed several pages about the campaign for violating the social media company's misrepresentation policies, according to a Facebook spokeswoman in 2019.



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WEA LEE'S GLOBAL NOTES

08/21/2020

CORONAVIRUS DIARY

Bannon Is A Time Bomb For Trump

Former White House chief strategist Steve Bannon was arrested Thursday after being charged with defrauding hundreds of thousands of dollars through his "We Build The Wall" funding campaign.

The White House issued a statement saying that President Trump has not been involved with Steve Bannon since the past election campaign and since the

early part of the administration and the president does not know the people involved with this project.

Bannon was arrested on a yacht owned by his friend, Guo Wengui, a Chinese billionaire, a controversial figure with his own history of legal entanglement.

This is very sad to say, but after Trump became president there have been

many of his associates and close assistants who have gone to jail. Steve Bannon could be one of them. These people are using their influence and power to create their own wealth.



Corruption is everywhere. Like ex-president Chan who was put in jail after his presidency. The case made headlines in the western media. In South Korea many of their former presidents were also put in jail because of corruption.

people in power do have the opportunity to use their position and turn to corrupt activities. Fortunately, we have an independent judicial system to watch for and deal with all these crooks.

We are living in such a critical time. The



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C4

Southern DAILY Make Today Different

COMMUNITY

UTHealth and Baylor College of Medicine are enrolling participants in rigorous studies investigating the therapeutic benefit of recovered COVID-19 patients' blood plasma. The evidence is needed to facilitate greater use of the popular, but still experimental, century-old treatment, as the FDA reportedly held back on granting emergency approval of the therapy because of the lack of such testing.

"This is exactly the study we need to be doing to determine once and for all if this therapy works," said Dr. Luis Ostrosky, study co-investigator and infectious disease specialist at McGovern Medical School at UTHealth. "Physicians have been using the therapy to try to save patients during the pandemic, knowing it's safe but not knowing if it really works. Now, we're going to find that out."

The trials will compare outcomes in participants who receive plasma and those who receive a placebo, the so-called gold standard of testing. The Food and Drug Administration reportedly has put on hold a plan to allow easier access to the therapy because of the lack of such testing. The treatment, known as convalescent serum therapy, is based on the idea that transfusing plasma from patients who've recovered from a virus transfers its healing powers, contained in antibodies made by the immune system to attack the infection. First used during the 1918 Spanish Influenza, it has become one of the go-to treatments for the disease caused by the coronavirus.

The therapy initially came in the spotlight for COVID-19 in late March, when medical teams at Houston Methodist and Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York City independently and on the same evening became the first U.S. hospitals to transfuse patients with recovered patients' plasma. Those initial patients recovered and went home.

This present-day plasma effort already involves 952 physicians at 1,046 registered sites nationwide. So far, 436 patients are enrolled, and, as of April 15, at least 118 have received infusions, according to information compiled by the Mayo Clinic, which is coordinating research efforts.

Houston Is Ground Zero For A Potential Lifesaving COVID-19 Treatment As Patients Are Now Being Enrolled In Plasma Studies



Alfredo Gutierrez, left, works with a blood sample he just drew from a plasma donor at Houston Methodist Hospital on Friday, May 15, 2020, in Houston. (Photo: Brett Coomer, Houston Chronicle)



Medical professionals wait by empty beds during a tour of the new Harris County Non-Congregate Medical Shelter in Houston. AP PHOTO/DAVID J. PHILLIP

Compiled And Edited By John T. Robbins, Southern Daily Editor

On March 28, the day the FDA issued its approval, Houston Methodist became the first academic hospital in the nation to deploy the therapy, which involves collecting about one quart of plasma from a survivor—enough to use to transfuse two people still struggling to recover. Texas doctors say they don't have enough proof yet to say if it works. But this old-school treatment has shown promise in reducing viral loads and improving lung function in patients in two limited Chinese studies.

But a major obstacle to rolling out broader plasma collection and infusion efforts remains a lack of testing for COVID-19. The scarcity of tests in Texas and elsewhere means many healthy people who suffered only mild cases were never formally diagnosed and thus can't donate plasma—even though they might be the best possible candidates. At present, hospital officials say no reliable tests exist for identifying COVID-19 antibodies in plasma, so the only way to learn if someone could contribute to the effort is if they were tested for COVID-19 while sick. That's why Methodist physicians began their study by calling some of the 230 patients who'd already been treated in that segregated COVID-19 section of the ER, people like attorney Troy Chandler. Chandler has donated plasma twice now. On Friday, he'll be driving down to

Houston Methodist's office tower to donate again—meaning he could save as many as six lives if it works the way physicians hope. He knows there's no proof yet, but his doctors have told him that "they haven't lost a patient that has taken this infusion and that all of their patients were ICU patients, and so that was very exciting."



Attorney Troy Chandler

Chandler is mostly working from home these days. He's almost certain his wife and at least one of his sons experienced mild cases of COVID-19 too. But they were never tested and can't donate. He wishes his family could do more.

During the Spanish flu epidemic of 1918, doctors first began to realize that transfusing plasma taken from patients who had recovered could help provide antibodies for

others who remained seriously ill.

The plasma collection and transfusion process for COVID-19 in the United States started with Methodist but has rapidly expanded, first to 40 hospitals as of last week and now to more than 1,000 sites. Methodist and others in that network are working together to share data and monitor the progress of patients treated with plasma infusions, Patti Muck, a spokesperson for Methodist, told the Observer.

The Food and Drug Administration has helped speed those efforts along by publishing formal study guidelines and encouraging individual donors (patients who were formally diagnosed and are at least two weeks post-recovery) to contact the American Red Cross to explore donation options. The American Association of Blood Banks recently set up a website to help people who have recovered from COVID-19 learn where they can donate too. In Houston, the plasma collection effort is still being led by an elite research team at Methodist. As of last week, that team had treated 11 of its sickest patients and taken plasma from 10 donors. They've now doubled that effort to 23 patients and 20 donors, including some like Chandler who have donated multiple times, Muck said Wednesday.



A patient donates plasma at Houston Methodist Hospital on Friday, May 15, 2020 in Houston. Patients can donate plasma multiple times after recovering

from COVID-19. Meanwhile, various local governments in Texas have been moving to boost the availability of COVID-19 testing too. Galveston County announced it will offer free tests to anyone. Elsewhere, government-driven research efforts are underway to determine whether a simple finger-prick blood test could be used to inform people whether they already have COVID-19 immunity. Back in Houston, Chandler snapped a selfie after he finished his latest round of plasma donation on Wednesday. This time, the whole process took only 45 minutes. He's hoping that other Texans soon will be lining up to help too. (Courtesy <https://www.texasobserver.org/> and Houston Chronicle)



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Editor's Choice



Herriman Mustangs cheerleaders display the American flag before a game against the Davis Darts, the first regular season football game in the United States since the coronavirus pandemic began, at Herriman High School in Herriman, Utah, August 13,...



Abdou Batrouni sits on the balcony of his home that was damaged by an explosion at the Beirut port, in the neighbourhood of Karantina, Beirut, Lebanon, August 13, 2020. In one of Beirut's poorest neighborhoods, people are still reeling from the explosion that flattened homes and killed many neighbors who felt like family. Residents are now struggling to find the money to rebuild, without help from the state in a city that was already deep in economic collapse. REUTERS/Alkis Konstantinidis



A student burns an A-level result during a protest at Parliament Square in London, Britain, August 16, 2020. The British government bowed to public pressure over its school exam grading system, ditching an algorithm that downgraded the results awarded to students in England after their tests were canceled due to COVID-19. The mathematical model used to assess grade predictions made by teachers lowered those grades for almost 40% of students taking their main school-leaving exams. REUTERS/Henry Nicholls



Students wearing white ribbons on their hair and wrists make the three-finger salute, inspired by the "Hunger Games" series, to show support for the student-led democracy movement outside the Education Ministry in Bangkok, Thailand, August 19, 2020. Demonstrators are seeking the resignation of the military-backed government, an end to the harassment of its critics and a new constitution and parliamentary elections, in a rejection of polls held last year that saw coup leader Prayuth Chan-ocha remain prime minister. REUTERS/Athit Perawongmetha



Kayapo indigenous people block Brazil's BR 163 national highway, a key grain highway, in Novo Progresso, Para state, Brazil August 18, 2020. The Kayapo tribe said in a statement that the federal government had failed to protect them from the coronavirus pandemic that has killed four of their elders, and has not consulted them on a plan to build a railway next to their land. "We are tired of unkept promises," the tribe said. REUTERS/Lucas Landau



Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) students Andrea Ramos, 10, and Alexander Ramos, 8, work on school-issued computers with unreliable internet connectivity, as their mother Anely Solis, 32, and their brother Enrique Ramos, 5, look on at their home in Los Angeles, California,



People react during a funeral for five minors who were found dead in a sugar cane field, in Cali, Colombia August 14, 2020. REUTERS/Juan Bautista Diaz



Vehicles are seen along Interstate 80 as flames from the LNU Lightning Complex Fire are seen on both sides on the outskirts of Vacaville, California, August 19, 2020. Nearly 11,000 lightning strikes hit the state over a 72-hour stretch this week, igniting 367 fires. Authorities are warning all 40 million state residents to be ready to evacuate, if necessary. REUTERS/Stephen Lam

UTHealth and Baylor College of Medicine are enrolling participants in rigorous studies investigating the therapeutic benefit of recovered COVID-19 patients' blood plasma.

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Medical professionals wait by empty beds during a tour of the new Harris County Non-Congregate Medical Shelter in Houston.

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