

LOCAL NEWS

12 charged in voter scandal

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Orange County Register

October 27, 2006 at 3:00 a.m.

Felony charges were filed this week against 12 signature gatherers accused of registering Orange County voters as Republicans without their consent – part of a criminal probe into voter flipping.

An Orange County Register investigation in April found that more than 100 people who thought they were signing petitions to cure breast cancer and punish child molesters were duped into registering as Republicans. The signature gatherers were part of an Orange County Republican registration drive that paid up to \$10 for each “convert,” especially in the heated state 34th Senate District.

In a joint investigation by the California Secretary of State and the Orange County Office of the District Attorney, each defendant was charged Tuesday with two to four counts of falsifying a voter registration card. Each charge carries a maximum penalty of three years in state prison. Many defendants had not been arrested as of Thursday afternoon.

News of the arrest warrants brought applause from a local Republican Party battered by scandal, most recently the investigation into a threatening letter sent to Hispanic voters by congressional candidate Tan Nguyen.

Orange County Republican Party Chairman Scott Baugh said his group was hurt by signature gatherers who took money for phony registrations.

"May they rot in jail for stealing from us and disenfranchising voters," Baugh said.

Orange County Democratic Party Chairman Frank Barbaro said he hoped the arrests and Baugh's cooperation in the Tan investigation "are indicative of a new effort by local Republican Party leaders to protect the rights of all Orange County voters."

Barbaro, however, also charged that the voter-registration fraud and the threatening letter had their genesis in a local GOP that in the past was accused of allowing such misdeeds to go unpunished.

Complaints of voter flipping in Orange County shone a light on the world of signature gatherers, most of whom move from one petition drive to another. A Register investigation found that some workers had criminal records for such things as prostitution and child molestation.

Susan O'Hare, 58, of Anaheim was among the voters flipped to the Republican Party without her knowledge. O'Hare thought she was signing a petition against pedophiles before she got a taped telephone message from Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger.

"This is appalling, and I am glad they found someone to pay for it," she said Thursday. "What I really want to know is: Who is behind the whole thing?"

Court records show that independent contractor Daniel Alwin Ricca has been accused of defrauding O'Hare. Ricca was hired by then Newport Beach-based Tom Bader & Associates, which in turn was hired by the Orange County Republican Party.

Bader said Thursday that he had no control over the antics of street-level petition gatherers.

"There's always the possibility somebody will try to do this," he said. "We're hoping these people never get to work in this field again."

Warrants were issued this week for Daniel Bates, 36, Sal Castillo, 46, Christopher Scott Dinoff, 31, Donahue Lamont Farrow, 34, Rick A. Floyd, 52, Jason Lee Hayes, 19, Jason Alexander Holly, 36, Anthony Infeanyi Ogwo, 49, Ricca, 33, Jessica Susan Sundell, 23, Don Cornell Williams, 45, and Susan Lynn Williamson, 34.

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Tony Saavedra | Reporter

Tony Saavedra is an investigative reporter specializing in legal affairs for the Orange County Register. His work has been recognized by the National Headliner Club, the Associated Press Sports Editors, the California

Newspaper Publishers Association, the Orange County Trial Lawyers Association and the Orange County Press Club. His stories have led to the closure of a chain of badly-run group homes, the end of a state program that placed criminals in inappropriate public jobs and the creation of a civilian oversight office for the Orange County Sheriff's Department, among other things. Saavedra has covered the Los Angeles riots, the O.J. Simpson case, the downfall of Orange County Sheriff-turned felon Michael S. Carona and the use of unauthorized drugs by Olympian Carl Lewis. Saavedra has worked as a journalist since 1979 and has held positions at several Southern California newspapers before arriving at the Orange County Register in 1990. He graduated from California State University, Fullerton, in 1981 with a bachelor of arts in communication.

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