

He talked, money walked

Former friends recount Knox Bridges' smooth ways and grand tales - then a string of financial debacles.

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As former friends and associates remember it, John Knox Bridges entered their lives with a remarkable story.

A lover of art and aviation, the Charlotte native told of coming from a family worth billions. He said he owned a corporate jet, hobnobbed with world leaders, and served on the boards of prestigious groups including New York's Guggenheim Museum and the World Health Organization.

He befriended Ben Long, a renowned N.C. fresco artist, and later volunteered to manage his business affairs.

Then the trouble began.

Through a series of false claims, Bridges made off with more than \$800,000 of Long's money, the artist and his son alleged in a 2008 lawsuit.

In July, the board of the Minnesota-based Lindbergh Foundation removed him as president after concluding he had misused \$600,000, documents and interviews show. Bridges has since repaid the money.

But the first time Bridges tried to return that money, he got it from another nonprofit he helped direct - the foundation that supports the N.C. Transportation Museum in Spencer. The Rowan County museum has gotten its money back, and Bridges has resigned from the foundation's board.

Bridges, 48 and living in Salisbury, has not responded to multiple calls, letters and visits requesting an interview. The law firm representing Bridges has instructed him not to comment, according to Craig Miller, a lawyer in the firm.

"But we believe some of your facts are just dead wrong and you really ought to look into the credibility of some of your sources," Miller said. He declined to elaborate.

In court papers, Bridges has denied that he misappropriated Ben Long's money. The son of a prominent Mecklenburg County minister, Bridges contended the artist was the one who owed him money.

"The complaint is filled with allegations and characterizations that are demonstrably false," Bridges responded in an answer to Long's lawsuit.

In September 2008, Bridges agreed to settle the suit by paying Long an undisclosed sum.

Bridges has made a large mark in the nonprofit world, where he has made donations and served on the boards of many groups - including the Charlotte History Museum and the Mississippi-based Catch-a-Dream Foundation.

Through his nonprofit work, he has cultivated friendships with an array of well-known people - including a female stunt pilot he recently dated.

But much of what Bridges has told them does not appear to be true, an Observer investigation found. He has not, for instance, served on the boards of the Guggenheim or the World Health Organization. He does not own any airplanes, according to federal records. And the Observer found no indication that his family owns a multibillion-dollar charitable trust, as he has claimed.

"In hindsight, I guess you could say there was a lot more we needed to know about him," said Roy Johnson, president of the N.C. Transportation Museum Foundation.

The art of the deal

Bridges grew up in Mecklenburg County, the son of the Rev. A.C. Bridges, a widely respected Presbyterian minister who presided over the historic Back Creek ARP church on Charlotte's northeast side.

Longtime church member Barbara Glasscock recalls when Knox was a charming, inquisitive boy with a mischievous streak. "He was sort of the rebel of the family. He didn't want to be put in the mold of the preacher's kid," she said.

After serving in the Coast Guard, Bridges returned to North Carolina and graduated from Montreat College with a B.A. in English and history in 1990. Later, he cared for his sick father and worked as a fundraiser for Montreat and Erskine colleges.

Former friends and associates say he had a talent for impressing people. He talked about a host of famous friends, including British billionaire Richard Branson and German chancellor Angela Merkel.

He said his family made its fortune from oil - and from the invention of rail cars to carry it - and it was now his job to manage the billions that resided in the family's charitable trust, recalled Ben Long's son, Angus.

A skillful storyteller with a sardonic sense of humor, Bridges smoked, drove an aging pickup truck and rarely carried cash, acquaintances recall.

The friendship between Long and Bridges began about a decade ago at Montreat College, in the Western N.C. mountains. At the time, Bridges was working for Montreat, while Long was creating a fresco for the college.

Bridges later offered to serve as Long's business manager. Saying he had little need for money, he insisted on working for free, the Longs say in the lawsuit.

Long had become well known for the frescos he created for churches, corporate lobbies and government buildings - particularly his massive, three-panel piece inside the Bank of America Corporate Center in Charlotte. As Long's agent, Bridges negotiated high-dollar fresco contracts for the artist - and then collected the payments, the lawsuit says.

The Longs contend Bridges took much of the money - more than \$500,000 since 2001. In some cases, the lawsuit maintains, Bridges forged Long's signature on checks, while in others he instructed buyers to make the checks out directly to him.

What's more, the lawsuit alleges, Bridges sold at least 50 pieces of Long's artwork without sending him the proceeds.

After the Crossnore School, a nonprofit children's home in the mountains of Avery County, contracted with Long to produce a fresco, Bridges told officials there he had paid large sums to cover Ben Long's back taxes - and that the payments should be made to Bridges, the Longs say in their lawsuit.

In fact, the Longs say, Bridges never paid off the artist's back taxes.

In his answer to the lawsuit, Bridges denied the Longs' allegations, calling some of them "patently false."

He said that Long insisted that he accept a 15 percent commission for negotiating fresco contracts and art sales - and that he had Long's consent for every payment he received.

Bridges also contended in court papers that he loaned thousands of dollars to Long, and paid some of his expenses. He asserted that the only Ben Long pieces he possessed were gifts from the artist.

Long and his son deny all of those contentions.

Bridges paid a hefty sum to settle the suit in September 2008, Angus Long says. He said a confidentiality agreement does not allow him to disclose the amount of the settlement. Even now, though, Ben Long is out more than \$500,000 because of Bridges' actions, his son says.

'Investments' gone awry

Soon, others came to regret their trust in Bridges.

In 2003, he joined the board of the Lindbergh Foundation, a Minnesota group dedicated to fulfilling the vision of aviator Charles Lindbergh. There, he became friends with one of the foundation's most influential officials: Reeve Lindbergh, 64, Charles Lindbergh's youngest daughter. In 2007, Bridges became the organization's president - a job that paid him \$75,000 that year.

Records and interviews reveal what happened next:

In August 2008, Bridges persuaded the board to invest about \$350,000 of the foundation's money in an oil-production company that he said promised a fixed return of 6.9 percent. Only later did foundation officials discover that the money never went to any such company, said a board member who asked not to be named.

In January, Bridges got the OK to invest another \$250,000 of foundation money in a startup company.

Records obtained by the Observer show that when foundation auditors asked for more information about those investments, Bridges balked.

"Bridges stated that the auditors have asked for confidential business plan information," according to the minutes of a May board meeting. "It's a closely held investment, and that information is not public information."

Bridges' expenditures, meanwhile, were beginning to attract the foundation's attention. By early this year, his expenses were \$11,000 over budget, according to the minutes of a February board meeting.

By June, foundation officials began to have serious questions about the money Bridges had persuaded them to invest. They pressured him to return the money.

In July, \$600,000 was wired to the foundation, ostensibly from Bridges. But foundation officials soon discovered the money came from the N.C. Transportation Museum Foundation - another organization Bridges helped direct.

Good news turns to bad

A phone call from the Lindbergh Foundation triggered alarm bells in North Carolina.

Bridges, then a vice president at the N.C. Transportation Museum's foundation, had told colleagues there that the \$600,000 was a "match" needed to obtain a gift from a wealthy philanthropist, said Roy Johnson, the foundation's president. Bridges said the benefactor wanted to see evidence - in the form of money wired to the Lindbergh Foundation - that recipient agencies had the money to match his gifts, Johnson said.

"The main issue that was being pressed ... was the urgency of doing something very rapidly to qualify for the matching funds," Johnson said.

Officials at the transportation museum had reason to trust Bridges. He had served for a decade on the foundation's board, a group that raises money to support the 57-acre historic site in northern Rowan County.

When Bridges presented his plan to board members, "We thought, 'Wow this is wonderful news,'" Johnson said. "It went from wonderful news to terrible news fairly quickly."

After the call from the Lindbergh Foundation, officials at the transportation museum discovered there was no philanthropist poised to give the museum \$600,000 - contrary to what Bridges had told them.

At the request of museum foundation officials, Bridges resigned from the board last month.

"The one thing that has come to my mind is how little I did know about him," said Elizabeth Smith, the museum's executive director.

After learning Bridges had misled the transportation museum's leaders, Lindbergh Foundation officials returned the money.

Through his attorney, Bridges in August repaid about \$613,000 to the Lindbergh Foundation. It's unclear where that money came from.

"I think that's all behind us," said Linden Blue, who serves on the Lindbergh Foundation's board and as CEO of jet manufacturer Spectrum Aeronautical. "... The effect was neutral and nobody got hurt."

The Lindbergh Foundation has alerted federal law enforcement authorities about the case, according to the foundation board member who requested anonymity. Angus Long has also notified the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department. Federal authorities have not acknowledged that they've received complaints, and it's unclear whether any investigation would occur.

In an Aug. 20 note, Lindbergh Foundation vice chairman Greg Maryniak informed his colleagues about the \$613,000 repayment and summed up his feelings about the ordeal: "In the words of those immortal philosophers, the Grateful Dead, 'What a long, strange trip it's been.'"

'A huge pattern'

When Patty Wagstaff, one of the nation's top air show pilots, met Bridges at a Lindbergh Foundation dinner last year, she found him charming, clever and funny.

After they began dating, she began to have other impressions. He said he would buy her a new aerobatic plane - a purchase of roughly \$400,000 - but never followed through, she said.

Chris Rudd, the mechanic who works on Wagstaff's planes, said Bridges promised to drum up money to help him host an aerobatic contest - but didn't do that, either.

Wagstaff also remembers trying to help Catch-a-Dream, a group that takes children with life-threatening illnesses on hunting and fishing trips. She said she gave Bridges - one of Catch-a-Dream's board members - a \$3,000 vacation package and asked him to donate it to the group.

She later discovered the organization never received the package, she said.

Marty Brunson, Catch-a-Dream's executive director, confirmed that his group received no such vacation package. He said that he has heard Wagstaff's contentions, and that Bridges has neither acknowledged nor denied them.

Earlier this year, Bridges took Wagstaff to Montreal. She said she later learned he had used a Lindbergh Foundation credit card to pay for the trip.

"It's a huge pattern," said Wagstaff, who broke up with Bridges in July. "...So many very, very smart people were taken in."

What might have been

Much of what Bridges told people about himself turned out not to be true, Wagstaff and others said.

When South Carolina's Erskine College named Bridges its "major gifts officer" in 2002, for instance, it said on its Web page that he had obtained Bachelor of Science and Master of Science degrees from the University of California at Berkeley.

But records indicate Bridges has no such degrees, according to the National Student Clearinghouse.

Bridges has recently resigned his position on the board of the Charlotte Museum of History. But he remains in an unpaid board position at Catch-a-Dream.

What he now does for a living is unclear. For a time, though, it appears he owned at least three houses.

In 2006, he and his mother bought a house near downtown Salisbury for \$200,000, real estate records show.

The following year, he bought another house about a mile away for \$225,000. Wagstaff remembers seeing about 100 pieces of artwork at the house when she visited earlier this year. (When an Observer reporter knocked on the door of the two-story brick house last month, paintings still adorned the walls.)

Bridges also owned a three-bedroom house in northeast Charlotte but sold it for \$205,000 in August 2008 - about the time he settled Long's lawsuit, records show.

Today, Angus Long says he's speaking out about Bridges to protect others.

"We need to let potential victims know who this person really is," he said. "We have no way of knowing what else he's doing ... How far does this web go?"

The money, he says, isn't what saddens him and his dad most. "When Knox got involved, he tore down a lot of relationships and burned a lot of bridges," the artist's son said.

Now, he says, his father's career is again going strong. But he wonders what else the artist might have accomplished if he'd never met Bridges: "He prevented a lot of great things from happening."

Staff Researchers Maria David and Marion Paynter contributed.