

Testimony before the United States Senate Special Committee on Aging

Testimony of Andy Martin

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562 Dirksen Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C.

TESTIMONY RE: J. BRYON MARTIN

Chairman Collins, Ranking Member McCaskill, and Distinguished Members of the Committee; thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to testify about my father's involvement with an international drug smuggling scam targeting seniors. I thank you for your interest and am delighted that the Senate is investigating this growing problem.

My father was the apparent victim of a "Romance Scam." The incident involving my dad has had a significant negative impact on his reputation, his finances, and his closest personal relationships. My father was arrested in Europe in July 2015 with nearly 2 KG of cocaine worth approximately \$450,000 in his possession. He thought he was merely bringing real estate documents to a woman he met, and fell in love with, online some 5-6 years ago. Today, my father continues to sit in a European prison having recently been sentenced to six years and one day for drug smuggling. At the age of 77 and in poor health, this is likely a life sentence.

The idea that my dad is now a convicted international drug smuggler is surreal as he had no prior criminal history. Before this conviction, my dad had never been charged with even a misdemeanor. I don't recall him ever getting so much as a speeding ticket or parking ticket in his entire life.

My dad is a retired pastor; he never drank, never smoked, didn't chase women and never swore. However, being human, he did have his shortcomings. He was too trusting of people to the point of being gullible. The story I am about to tell has been pieced together from talking to my dad, from his letters, and from other members of the family.

About six years ago, at age 70, my dad found himself single, broke and alone. So, he moved in with one of my sisters in Maine. Bored and lonely, Dad would go on internet chat sites. One day Dad met a young, attractive woman in her thirties who claimed to be living in the UK, named "Joy". Joy was a struggling artist. For several months they would chat online or even over the phone for hours at a time. They exchanged life stories and photos of each other.

Dad quickly became infatuated with Joy. She gave him lots of attention and told him that she loved him and wanted to come to America and marry him. He even purchased a plane ticket and sent it to her to come and visit, however, for some reason or another, this didn't happen.

Joy claimed to be from a large, wealthy family from Northern Africa. Her father was supposedly an oil baron with holdings all over the world. Joy alleges that her parents were killed by her dad's business partner who was after his share of the money. Before his death, Joy's father had hidden a vast sum of money and only Joy knew where it was but she couldn't get it because her jealous brothers were after it and were always watching her. Her life was in constant danger.

Joy claimed to be poor and unable to buy food. If my dad would be so kind to send her a few hundred bucks a month, dad would be her "hero." Dad would often forego paying my sister rent so that he could instead support Joy, which caused my sister great hardship.

Joy would often discuss with my dad that she had also inherited a large estate in South America but couldn't sell it because she didn't have custody of the title. She was unable to get a visa to go herself but if someone would go for her and bring these "real estate documents" to her, she would be able to sell the property. She could then come to America with her millions and marry my father. Dad promised he would go for her but couldn't afford to pay for the trip himself so the plan was put on hold.

Dad's online romantic relationship with Joy continued for five years as did the payments. Then early last year dad met a local woman in Maine. After a short engagement, they got married in May 2015. Dad informed Joy that he can no longer support her and that he needed to end their relationship. Apparently Joy took the news hard. Joy reminded Dad of his promise to help her with her real estate papers. Joy offered to pay dad a significant amount of money if he would go to South America and bring the papers to her in London. Broke and wanting to recover the money he had sent Joy over the years, dad decided to keep his promise.

Dad invited his new wife to come along but she refused and begged him to stay - but to Dad, a promise was a promise. Even though Dad was in significant pain, and scheduled to have surgery on his back in a few weeks, he decided he could make the trip and be back in time for the operation.

Joy managed to scrape up enough money to send Dad a plane ticket to South America telling him that her family's attorney would meet him with the papers at the airport. Dad was to rest for a night or two at a hotel that Joy arranged, then fly to two other countries before reaching his final intended destination in London, deliver the documents to Joy then return to Maine, however, my Dad never made it to London

When Dad arrived in South America nobody was there to meet him. So, he got in contact with Joy, or her roommate, and learned that the attorney was delayed and was instructed to wait at the hotel for him. After a few days, Dad had no money for the hotel and had not heard from the attorney. Joy told him that she would send him some money via Western Union and that the lawyer would be there and to please wait.

After 8-10 days a man finally showed up with two sealed packages that felt like books. He gave the “books” to Dad and a plane ticket to London. The man informed dad that the books were sealed for protection but if security wanted to inspect them, it’s okay to allow them. This apparently satisfied my dad.

The following day, Dad placed the packages in a carry-on bag and boarded the plane to London but first had to make two connections in Europe. Upon arriving in Europe at the first airport, airline staff met my dad with a wheel chair to take him to his connecting gate. He was stopped by security who saw the books sticking out of the bag which was sitting on his lap. To my dad’s horror, they open the books and found cocaine packed inside.

When my dad did not arrive in London as scheduled, my dad’s wife started to immediately receive phone calls and emails from individuals inquiring about Dad’s whereabouts and why he wasn’t in London. These calls came at all hours of the day and night from men with thick African sounding accents looking for my father. They appeared angry and threatening. My dad’s wife ended up having to change her phone number. A few weeks later dad’s wife told me that she was washing her hands of him. As none of my siblings want anything to do with Dad, due to his long history of being entangled in scams, that leaves only my wife, Liza, and I to help him. Liza and I were already planning a trip to Europe this past fall so we stopped by dad’s prison to check in on him. Dad was overwhelmed when he saw us and broke down in tears. He kept telling us how ashamed he was and how stupid he felt having fallen for this scam. He honestly thought Joy was his friend and trusted her.

Joy was never pushy about the trip to South America and London until dad announced he was getting married. I guess at this point the scammers felt this was their last chance to use my father so they turned him into an unwitting drug mule.

Now my dad may very well spend the rest of his life in a European prison, ashamed and alone. Dad is in very poor health. He passes out frequently from his back pain, and still needs surgery. He has previously had prostate cancer, a quadruple bypass surgery, and has a pace maker. Fortunately he has been kept in the infirmary since his arrest.

When Liza and I saw him he looked so frail and his mental capacity was in obvious decline. He spoke of his innocence. He seemed confused about different aspects of his trip. He would take events out of order then later repeat them in a different order. He kept wanting to discuss his plans when he returned home like it was going to happen any day. Then he would return to his shame and break down into tears again.

I will close with the last paragraph from the first letter dad wrote me in prison:

“I want to thank you both for not abandoning me here. What to do once released (if I don’t die here). I have no idea as I am now homeless once again. How I miss (my wife)... I feel so terrible (for) all the pain I caused the woman I love and only wanted to

provide more than Social Security allowed – but never anything illegal. I trust you believe me!!!! Love Dad.”

I would like to thank the Committee for letting me share my family’s story, and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.