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## NNB News : 2014 : 06 : 25 : Con man leads Times researcher and FBI on hunt

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## Con man leads Times researcher and FBI on hunt

**BY MARK WOLFENBARGER**

NNB Student Reporter

TAMPA – In another life, Bobby Thompson was named John Donald Cody.

As Cody, he was a Harvard-educated lawyer and former Army intelligence officer in Phoenix.

As Thompson, he was a con man and federal fugitive who was living in a rundown duplex in Tampa's Ybor City.

That is where Cody caught the attention of the Tampa Bay Times and became the focus of the biggest, most complex case in the career of John Martin, the Times' senior news researcher.



Courtesy Tampa Bay Times  
John Martin, Senior News Researcher

For months, Martin and Times investigative reporter Jeff Testerman used mountains of records and dozens of interviews to produce a series of stories that exposed Thompson's fraud and made him the subject of a national man hunt.

Before good journalists write a story, they dig through records and backgrounds to uncover every possible detail.

Martin, 49, spends most of his days entrenched in archives.

With a clean-shaven bald head, wire-rim glasses and well-groomed goatee, Martin has a scholarly appearance.

A Tampa native and graduate of the University of Tampa, Martin began with the Times in 1995, two years after he earned a master's degree in library and information science from the University of South Florida in Tampa.

Whether it is government officials or private citizens, Martin's job is to research their past. "If we're going to do a story about someone, we want to know who that person is and what kind of baggage they carry," he said.

Martin said he likes researching people who have something to hide. And none of his subjects had more to hide than Cody-turned-Thompson.

In 1984, soon after a judge threatened to hold him in contempt of court for making false statements, Cody abandoned his Corvette in a Phoenix airport parking lot and disappeared. It was discovered that he had stolen almost \$100,000 from clients.

He was put on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted list in 1987. Cody's legal assistant, Margaret Chapman, said that investigators searching Cody's office found documents that indicated several plastic surgeries.

In 2002, Cody started the U.S. Navy Veterans Association under the name Bobby Thompson. It was a scam operation disguised as a charity.

Martin and Testerman began investigating the operation in 2009 when it contributed \$500 to Hillsborough County Commissioner Kevin White's re-election campaign – an unusual gesture for a

supposed nonprofit.

Several weeks after Testerman interviewed Thompson outside his Ybor City duplex, he disappeared.

In their reporting, Testerman and Martin learned that Thompson had attended Republican dinners and posed for photos with bigwigs like George W. Bush and John Boehner.

By 2010, the scam had brought in more than \$100 million. Cody contributed hundreds of thousands of dollars to Republican campaigns, the Times learned, but veterans received little.

That was the same year the Times broke the story. It reported that 84 of the 85 officers of the charity listed on documents – all but Thompson – were nowhere to be found and that 99 percent of its annual revenue could not be accounted for.

It was “totally a records-driven story,” Martin said.

Thompson spent two more years running before an Ohio-led U.S. Marshals Service task force caught him in Portland, Ore., where he was hiding under the name Anderson Yazzie. He refused to disclose his identity, which authorities eventually learned through fingerprints.

Throughout the trial that followed, Cody’s body withered and became frail. His hair grew into a greasy, salt-and-pepper mop. He acquired a scar on his forehead from bashing it against a cell wall.

By the end, he resembled Charles Manson more than a man with such lofty credentials.

In 2013, Cody, 66, was convicted of 23 counts of fraud, money laundering and theft in the scam that Testerman and Martin first exposed three years earlier. He was sentenced to 28 years in prison.

Martin said he “spent more time on this story than any other story I’ve worked on.”

Testerman may write a book about the case.

If he does, he won’t be able to use one obvious title. That has already been taken for a Leonardo DiCaprio movie: Catch Me If

You Can.

Information from the Tampa Bay Times was used in this report.

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MARK WOLFENBARGER - APRIL 6, 2015 (3:20 PM)

[...] That is where Cody caught the attention [...] [...]

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