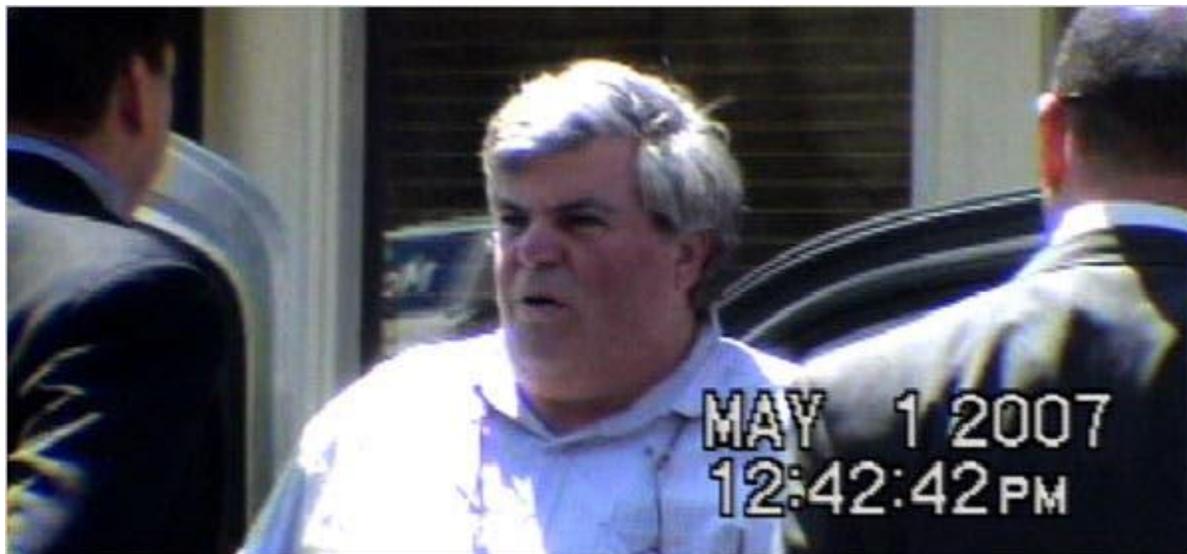


Man Posed as Yale Aide in Swindle of Irish Immigrants, Authorities Say



On the day of his arrest in Manhattan, Ralph Cucciniello, 55, on a video from a private investigator who had been contacted by an immigrant. Credit...Olwyn Triggs

By **Jennifer Medina**

- May 30, 2007

NEW HAVEN, May 29 — It sounded good enough to be a dream come true, yet practical enough to be possible. The illegal Irish immigrants were eager to get their papers, and someone at Yale Law School was eager to help them.

The process seemed simple and straightforward: file some paperwork, get a medical exam and be fingerprinted. Write a check for \$5,000. Ralph Cucciniello at the Yale Immigration Law Clinic would take care of the rest.

But there is no such thing as the Yale Immigration Law Clinic. Mr. Cucciniello, according to university officials and law enforcement authorities, was not a lawyer, but a research assistant with prior convictions on fraud charges who was running an extensive swindle out of the Yale Law School library.

Over the last two years, the authorities say, he collected millions of dollars from at least 200 illegal immigrants and provided nothing in return. He was arrested on May 1 in Manhattan on charges of a scheme to defraud and grand larceny. The charges were filed in New York because many of the immigrants live there and because Mr. Cucciniello is accused of collecting some of the payments there. Prosecutors in Connecticut are also investigating the case.

“He had Yale attached to his name; what more could we ask for?” said Donald, 33, who, like others who say they sent Mr. Cucciniello money, did not give his last name because he is in the country illegally. “Everything he did had a purpose. He played it all just like a lawyer.”

Mr. Cucciniello, 55, who was released on his own recognizance, is scheduled to appear in court on Aug. 15. His lawyer, George Goltzer, declined to discuss the case on Tuesday.

It is not clear exactly how Mr. Cucciniello obtained a university e-mail address and access to law school buildings. Jan Conroy, a spokeswoman for the law school, said that Mr. Cucciniello had never been an employee of the university, but that he had “on occasion served as a volunteer research assistant for a particular professor at the law school.”

“He has not been authorized by the law school or the clinics to undertake any activities or to represent any clients,” Ms. Conroy said in a statement. “Upon learning of his arrest, the law school suspended his access to all law school facilities.”

Ms. Conroy would not say which professor Mr. Cucciniello worked for, but said the research was not for any project directly related to the law school. A private investigator working for the immigrants who had paid Mr. Cucciniello identified the professor, who did not respond to telephone messages left on Tuesday.

Like other law schools, Yale runs several law clinics staffed by students, including one that works on behalf of illegal immigrants trying to seek asylum and another that focuses on human rights violations.

The Yale reputation was all Mr. Cucciniello needed to establish his credibility.

Many of the well-off Irish immigrants who paid Mr. Cucciniello travel in the same social circles, and routinely assured one another that they were getting the right treatment from a bright assistant at one of the finest universities in America. They never suspected anything was awry until the news of Mr. Cucciniello’s arrest was reported in The Irish Voice this month.

Several immigrants said he had his story worked out smoothly.

He would explain over the telephone or via e-mail that he had set up the clinic on behalf of the law school dean and was using a loophole through the Department of Homeland Security to obtain green cards for people here illegally. Typically, he would summon the immigrants to a desk or office in the Yale Law School library, where he conducted extensive interviews, asking about everything from parking tickets to bank-account balances. He warned them that once they were issued green cards, the federal government would probably try to collect back taxes, perhaps as a way to prepare them to hand over more money down the road, the immigrants said.

After directing them to complete several government forms, Mr. Cucciniello would say it would take several months for the government to run a background check. He would routinely call, the immigrants said, to update them on the progress of their case or ask for more details.

And each time, he would begin the conversation with an official-sounding disclaimer: This conversation is protected by attorney-client privilege. Everything you say will be kept private.

He reassured them that while the process was often long, it was progressing smoothly.

“Every time you had a question, he had an answer; he always seemed to care what was going on,” said Andrew, 25, who was living in New York for several months before he met Mr. Cucciniello. “There were all kinds of specific little bits and pieces that sounded too exact to be made up. Every time I might have gotten nervous, there was a reason not to be.”

For instance, several immigrants said, Mr. Cucciniello routinely assured them that he had spoken with government officials and they were free to travel outside of the country — often to Ireland — and return to the United States without a problem. In several instances, it worked, though it was likely only a lucky coincidence.

But after one young man who was “in the program,” as the immigrants called Mr. Cucciniello’s “clinic,” was detained at the border in Canada this year, others became suspicious. One woman contacted Olwyn Triggs, an Irish immigrant who runs a New York private investigation firm, P. I. Network, who quickly uncovered Mr. Cucciniello’s criminal record.

In 1996, he was convicted of defrauding several people in Passaic, N.J., of more than \$250,000 in a business scheme. Newspaper reports show that he was sentenced to 30 years in prison, but did not serve time because he was placed in the federal witness protection program. He was convicted and indicted on other charges of fraud dating to the 1970s, but apparently did not serve any time.

Ms. Triggs contacted officials in the New York Police Department and the Manhattan district attorney’s office, which filed charges against Mr. Cucciniello on May 2.

“Clearly he knew to prey on a group of people who could afford this and would do almost anything to get it,” Ms. Triggs said.

In recent weeks, Ms. Triggs spent hours trying to persuade the immigrants to tell law enforcement officials about their dealings with Mr. Cucciniello, but many are loath to do so for fear of being deported.

“Now I feel like my head has a flashing light on it screaming ‘I’m illegal’ ” said one 32-year-old man who lives in Florida. “And I tried to pay a lot of money and do a lot of things so that wouldn’t be true anymore.”