

Congo drama unveils enigma - An Orlando entrepreneur emerges after 2 of his employees were kidnapped.

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By Jim Leusner

The incident happened on the other side of the world, but it cast a spotlight on a low-profile businessman and the crisis-management firm he operates in the heart of downtown Orlando.

Two local employees advising a presidential candidate in the Democratic Republic of the Congo had been arrested and detained, and Frank L. Amodeo was making pleas for help to government, humanitarian and media organizations. When Joe Robinson of Orlando and Kevin Billings of Maitland were released nine days later from the central African country, they flew the final leg of their trip on Amodeo's Learjet. He was the first to welcome them home.

Until that highly publicized event last month, Amodeo had been operating unnoticed by most people in Central Florida. Yet in the past several years, he and his associates have assembled a network of interconnected businesses that spreads across three floors of Orlando high-rises.

Amodeo, a venture capitalist, says he was the major financial backer in the purchase of Mirabilis Ventures as a tiny company in 2005. Since then, Mirabilis has bought or has purchased a partial interest in 70 companies that Amodeo says have combined annual revenues of about \$1 billion. One of those affiliated companies is AQMI Strategy Corp., which employed the two men in Congo and lists Amodeo as its president.

The companies under the Mirabilis umbrella range from security operations to consulting firms to construction businesses, and Amodeo says they employ 1,500 full-time and 3,500 temporary workers.

Because Mirabilis is privately held, there is no way to independently confirm many of Amodeo's statements.

"By 2012, I expect I'll have offices within one hour of every human alive everywhere," he said during a recent interview with the Orlando Sentinel. "At that time, we'll probably have 30,000 [employee] consultants and 500,000 [other] employees."

Mirabilis, he has told employees, will "change the world."

Disbarred, imprisoned

Amodeo, 45, has gone through his own transformations. He was disbarred as a bankruptcy attorney in Georgia for his handling of a client's funds and spent two years in federal prison after pleading guilty to defrauding another client out of \$50,000.

Born in Detroit and raised in Orlando, Amodeo graduated from the University of Central Florida before moving to Atlanta to attend the Emory University School of Law. He started his law practice in Georgia in 1988.

He was disbarred six years later after that state's Supreme Court found he repeatedly mishandled a client's funds. The court found that Amodeo failed to return money to the client and wrote several checks on closed accounts. In its ruling, the court also said Amodeo engaged in unprofessional conduct involving "dishonesty, fraud."

The client in that case, Alphe Pearl of Atlanta, said she turned to Amodeo to manage debts in December 1991 after a partner in a collection agency stole money and died. Instead, she said, Amodeo never repaid the money she gave him.

Amodeo said he paid Pearl \$30,000 before he left Georgia, but she said she is owed thousands more.

"I'm a senior citizen and could use that money," said Pearl, 72.

Amodeo acknowledges that a dozen clients in Georgia have sued him, claiming he owes them several hundred thousand dollars. He said the actual losses were about \$150,000 and largely the result of failed investments with clients, not fraud. Amodeo said he paid back some victims and is in the process of repaying the others.

"I had some great cases," he said. "And I was absolutely horrendous at managing the firm."

Turning his life around

After his disbarment, Amodeo returned to Orlando. He worked in real estate and also served as a "liquidation agent," helping troubled businesses to shut down, records show. But troubles soon followed.

In 1995, he was arrested and jailed in Orange County on forgery and grand-theft charges leveled by a business associate. Prosecutors later dropped the charges. In 1996, the Internal Revenue Service slapped Amodeo with \$83,000 in tax liens. In 1997, he filed for bankruptcy with only \$500 to his name. A year later, he was sentenced to federal prison plus three years of probation in Georgia based on the \$50,000 fraud case that occurred in 1993.

It was in prison, Amodeo said, that he came to grips with his mistakes.

"I wasted my [law] license," said Amodeo, who is married, has two children and lives in Orlando. "I was wasting my talents. . . . It was stupid."

Prison, he said, "was sort of God's way of waking me up. . . . While I was at [prison] boot camp, I became something different."

By late 2003, court records show, Amodeo paid the \$50,000 restitution in the Atlanta criminal case, was off federal probation and was making money buying or helping business clients close troubled companies. During the next few years, Amodeo said, he started commanding fees up to \$100,000 and began to repay the IRS, creditors, friends and former clients in Atlanta.

In one deal to turn around a company, Amodeo said he made enough money to be the main financial backer in the purchase of then-tiny Mirabilis and to begin hiring experts to run it. Citing client confidentiality, he would not provide details of the deal.

"He was always smart," said his father, Frank P. Amodeo, 67, who lives in Orlando. "He's almost at the genius level."

The elder Amodeo made headlines several years ago as a lead plaintiff in a class-action lawsuit against five major tobacco companies. A Florida jury awarded a record \$145 billion judgment to sick Florida smokers in 2000. The case, including Amodeo's \$5.8 million award, was thrown out by a state appeals court. It is still tied up in Florida's Supreme Court.

Thinking big

Sitting in his 28th-floor office of AQMI Strategy Corp. at the SunTrust Tower in Orlando, Amodeo explained his current role in Mirabilis, the holding company with which AQMI is affiliated.

Amodeo said he is an adviser to Mirabilis and its holdings but not a day-to-day manager. But he says he finances acquisitions, brings in new businesses to the firm and helps close big deals.

"It's all my money," he said.

Amodeo said Mirabilis and its subsidiaries evaluate distressed restaurant, construction, human-resources, insurance and real-estate companies -- or any other firm that fits into his "capital genesis" philosophy. The theory focuses on buying companies cheap, turning them around and using Mirabilis-related affiliates as their vendors, keeping profits within the conglomerate.

Amodeo acknowledges his approach can be unconventional and involve creative funding.

For example, in a 2005 buyout of Presidion Corp., a payroll and human-resources company, Amodeo said Mirabilis used 32,500 pounds of "precious-metal concentrate" -- gold- and platinum-mining residue -- to buy \$25 million in preferred stock.

Behind his desk are seven types of globes mapping out the world. On the wall is a plasma monitor with Synex, interactive software Mirabilis is developing for a mapping, economic and world-behavior model to follow and predict global business trends.

Mirabilis also is involved in charity work, according to the Web site of its key consulting subsidiary, Nexia Strategy Corp.

The site includes press releases about Mirabilis' charity to Hurricane Katrina victims, needy Orlando kids and Crimeline, as well as photos of Amodeo donating or raising money.

"Frank is a genuine humanist," said Robert Pollack, a physician and top Mirabilis officer. "Frank truly makes and believes in making life better for the world around him."

Raising his profile

Amodeo has generally kept a low profile.

But during the past year -- and in the midst of the political season -- Amodeo has started to raise his public image. Earlier this year, he and his top executives were photographed with Orlando Mayor Buddy Dyer after contributing \$50,000 for a children's charity event that Mirabilis helped sponsor.

Recently, Amodeo's office hosted a book-signing and congressional fundraiser for Democrat Charlie Stuart. The man signing the books: Richard Clarke, who has been an adviser to the administrations of President Bush and his father, as well as those of Bill Clinton and Ronald Reagan. In another recent event, Amodeo was listed on the host committee for a fundraiser for Democratic U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson.

Stuart's brother, George, a former Orlando city commissioner and ex-state senator, joined Mirabilis and Nexia last year. He compares Amodeo to Orlando business and community-minded pioneers such as lawyer-banker Billy Dial and ABC Liquors founder Jack Holloway, who are deceased, and retired Darden Restaurants CEO Joe Lee.

New legal challenges

Last month, the U.S. trustee in a Tampa bankruptcy case alleged in court documents that Mirabilis or its employees "engaged in fraud, dishonesty and mismanagement, and/or are incompetent" to manage the affairs of Community Health Solutions of America LLC. Mirabilis invested in the company last year, and Community filed for bankruptcy earlier this year.

The trustee charged that Mirabilis billed the company \$96,000 in excessive fees and withdrew \$480,000 from accounts in the days and weeks before it sought court protection and omitted withdrawals from bankruptcy statements.

Amodeo said Mirabilis invested \$1.9 million in Community and pushed for the initial bankruptcy so the court could oversee its activities. He said his lawyers will prove Mirabilis did nothing wrong.

"I'm telling you that not only is it not true, it's not possible," he said.

Amodeo has filed an objection to the new trustee appointed to the case -- Tampa attorney John Anthony -- who he charged in court records was biased and defamatory in past litigation. A Tampa bankruptcy judge, however, ruled recently that Anthony had no conflict in the Community Health bankruptcy matter and could remain on the case.

In 2004, Anthony had complained in a letter to the U.S. Secret Service that Amodeo and some associates had siphoned cash in the bankruptcies of a Daytona Beach company -- Atlas Welding -- and another unrelated business in Fort Lauderdale.

Anthony at the time represented Merrill Lynch Business Financial Services, a creditor of the two failed companies.

Amodeo denied the accusations in court records, and Merrill Lynch dropped a lawsuit against him in the Fort Lauderdale case. A bankruptcy judge also ruled that Merrill's claims of financial irregularities by Amodeo were "largely unfounded" and that allegations of "hidden assets . . . simply did not exist."

"If anyone loses money in bankruptcy cases, it's me," Amodeo said.

Amodeo insists he is not squandering the hard lessons he has learned -- and is making the most of his life.

"I will not miss opportunities for the things I need to do," he said. "But what I do need to do is that I use the second chance and make the world a better place."