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## Flaming Bob Anderson and the free PFLAG money

by Clifton Spires  
Special to Q-Notes  
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[Ed. note: This story is reprinted to remind readers to use caution when responding to telephone requests from "community leaders." Q-Notes has published stories of similar scams used in the Carolina's. And PFLAGers in Tennessee have recently been warned about phone pleas from a man claiming to be the partner of Rev. Bob Galloway of MCC Nashville.]

My wife and I had been members of a northern Ohio chapter of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) for 18 months. Because of a recent growth in membership, we decided to allow the group to use our private number as a contact listing in our local gay newspaper.

My wife and I and another member, "Barbarella von Trapp," — not her real name, nor anyone else's, I hope — were aware of the risks when we allowed our home telephone numbers to be listed as contacts for the group. However, we consider ourselves cautious individuals who are intelligent and strong enough not to let calls made as pranks and by cranks intimidate or annoy us. We also believed, perhaps with naïveté, that most of the calls would be legitimate.

We learned otherwise on Easter weekend. Consequently, I am passing this cautionary tale on to readers.

On Saturday, Easter Eve, I arrived home around 10 pm, having spent the day in Columbus visiting relatives. When I got home, my wife informed me that one of PFLAG's members — "Rock Wilde," a good gay-sounding pseudonym — had called our house with an emergency. It seemed Rock, a big, soft-spoken gentle and lovable factory worker, had been mugged in Detroit that evening and was stranded in Toledo because his car was disabled. Could we help him out financially so he could get back home and lick his wounds?

My wife had no reason to doubt the caller, who did sound like Rock. And she was pre-disposed to be sympathetic. Our oldest son once made a similar call to us after being mugged outside a gay bar in Columbus. I also had to drive to Columbus and bring home a gay minister friend who gave the wrong man a lift one snowy night and ended up having his car stolen. We knew the horror stories that all parents and friends of gay people fear: It was horrifying to hear that something like this happened to a good guy like Rock, but my wife was inclined to believe it because we knew it could happen.

Since we never have any money to spare, my wife said she was unable to help Rock out financially, but offered to call someone else. Rock told her he had called us because ours was the only telephone number he had with him. Could she give him some other PFLAG members' telephone numbers? My wife agreed and gave him the numbers of three PFLAG couples: "Thelma Abbott and Louise Costello," "Mickey and Judy Laurel," and "Fred and Ginger Hardy." (I can't help it; I like old movies.)

"Jeez," I said, when my wife was done telling me the story. "I wish I'd been home. I would have driven to Toledo and brought him home."

The next day, Easter morning, my wife became ill and had to be taken to the hospital. She ordered my son and me to finish fixing the covered dish she was planning to take to the PFLAG Easter potluck that evening. When I got back from the hospital, I posted an email to the PFLAG members and told them about my wife's condition and why she wouldn't be attending. I also mentioned Rock's situation.

A little bit later, I got an email back from Rock. "Just want you to know that I'm alive and well and I wasn't in Detroit last night and my car is fine," he said. "It wasn't me."

Wondering what the heck was going on, I traveled with my son to the PFLAG dinner. We were the first to arrive, but were soon joined by Barbarella von Trapp, the other contact person for the group.

"The strangest thing happened yesterday," she said. "I got several calls from someone wanting directions to the meeting. He identified himself as 'Bob Anderson' and said he had attended one of our PFLAG meetings before. I wonder if he'll be here tonight."

How odd, I thought. I told her about my wife's call from the guy who said he was Rock Wilde and the subsequent email from the real Rock saying that he hadn't been in an accident.

"That's funny," Barbarella said. "This Bob

Anderson guy said he remembered some guy from the meeting he attended — he said he was really flaming. I thought maybe it was one of the few meetings I missed. I couldn't think of anyone who fit that description, except maybe YOU."

It was true: the men in our PFLAG group, gay and straight, are pretty low on the "flaming" ladder. I am probably as flamboyant as we get.

"Anyway," Barbarella continued. "I couldn't think of anyone, so I just said, 'Uh ... was it Rock Wilde?' It was the first guy's name I thought of. He said, 'That's the guy, how's Rock doing?'"

To make a long story short, "Bob" asked Barbarella for Rock's phone number. Barbarella didn't have it handy, but figured my wife and I would. And so she gave "Bob Anderson" — and that IS the name the caller used — our number. We figured he then called my wife and she gave him the other members' numbers, since she thought she was helping out good old Rock.

Shortly after this, Thelma Abbott and Louise Costello arrived at the potluck. Barbarella and I repeated our stories.

"Yeah, we got the email from Rock saying he was OK," Louise said.

"That guy called our house, pretending he was Rock," Thelma added.

"I didn't think it was him, so I gave the phone to her," Louise continued.

"I could tell right away it wasn't Rock, so I asked him what he always says when he calls us," Thelma said, referring to how the real Rock always asks whichever woman answers the telephone if her husband is there. (Trust me on this, there are no husbands in the Abbott-Costello household.)

"The guy didn't know and so we told him to quit playing games and identify himself or we'd hang up," Louise said. "He didn't and we did."

By this point, we were amused and somewhat relieved that no serious harm had occurred. Mickey and Judy Laurel then arrived and we repeated the growing story to them. They said that they received a call from an operator asking if they would accept a collect call, but the caller was cut off before the connection was made. They wondered if it was the Rock Wilde impersonator.

By now, a lot of people were arriving and the story was making the rounds. The real Rock showed up and we all teased him about his friend, "Flaming Bob Anderson."

Then, Fred and Ginger Hardy arrived and asked what everyone was laughing about. One by one, Thelma and Louise and Mickey and Judy and Barbarella and I told them about Flaming Bob. We were laughing so much that we didn't notice the Hardys' smiles starting to freeze and then fade.

"He called us, too," Ginger said in a serious tone. The room became very quiet. I started to get a sick feeling in my stomach.

"Did you give him any money?" I asked, knowing the answer before it was said.

"Yeah," Fred replied. "We wired him \$200."

The tone of the potluck was dampened slightly, although Fred and Ginger — the loving parents of four adult children, including a gay son — did their best to pooh-pooh the situation and keep everybody's spirits up. Barbarella and I apologized profusely for releasing anyone's telephone number. The others all pointed out that our intentions were good. Rock apologized for not having been in Detroit, but said at least he now knew who he could call for money if he needed it.

I didn't help things when I said that in my work as a journalist, I've seen this kind of scam before, "although the usual victims are senior citizens." Fred and Ginger, young grandparents who won't be ready for a retirement or a nursing home for a few years yet, gave me a look that told me I should quit while I was ahead.

We all agreed that when we went home, we would report the series of incidents to our local law enforcement officials (the five households involved are in three different communities). I went to the hospital and told my wife about it. She felt guilty and urged me to apologize to everyone for her part.

When the Laurels got home that evening, their phone was ringing. It was the operator asking them if they would accept a collect call from a Rock Wilde. They said no and posted an email to the group about it.

The Hardys, who were out \$200, called their local sheriff's office. While the deputy was there, Flaming Bob, still pretending to be Rock, called them again. The deputy listened in on the call.

As of this writing, the guy we call Flaming

See BOB on Page 12