

# Baseball star's grandma accused of fraud

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By JOHN BURNETT - Tribune-Herald staff writer

The mother of a prominent Hilo baseball coach and grandmother of a star minor league baseball player has pleaded not guilty in federal court to charges she bilked investors of approximately \$475,000 in an international oil investment scam over a period of almost a decade.

Roberta Beck Wong, 72, of Hilo pleaded not guilty on July 2 in Honolulu before federal Magistrate Judge Kevin S.C. Chang to 20 counts of investment fraud. She is scheduled to face trial at 9 a.m. on Jan. 8, 2013, before U.S. District Judge Leslie Kobayashi in Honolulu.

Wong is the mother of baseball coach Kolen "Kaha" Wong and the grandmother of Kolten Wong, a former Kamehameha Schools-Hawaii and University of Hawaii baseball standout who plays for the Class AA Springfield (Mo.) team in the St. Louis Cardinals' farm system.

Roberta Wong is listed on the state Department of Commerce and Consumer Affairs website as the agent and a manager of Edco Petroleum LLC in Hilo, a company the website states is "not in good standing." Kaha Wong and Taryn Kealani Wong are also listed as managers of the company, although Roberta Wong is the only defendant listed on the indictment.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Les Osborne told the Tribune-Herald on Tuesday that Wong's family members "are not subjects or targets (of the criminal investigation) or in any way involved."

The Tribune-Herald was unable to contact Wong. A listed telephone number for Edco has been disconnected. An early Tuesday afternoon call to Wong's attorney, Assistant Federal Defender Sean Coutain, was not returned by press time.

Wong is free on \$50,000 bond and was ordered to surrender her passport. She also was ordered not to contact "directly, indirectly, or through third parties ... co-defendants, co-conspirators, witnesses, or victims."

The indictment, dated June 21, states that starting in December 2003, Wong "and others known and unknown to the grand jury" devised "a scheme and artifice to defraud and to obtain money from others ... by means of materially false pretenses, representations and promises, as well as omissions of material facts ... ."

The document states that Wong "held herself out to various prospective investors as being associated with the 'Rockefeller Foundation'" and as "a successful person with numerous ties to investment programs and prominent people in Africa." It also states that Wong told investors that for putting their money "in oil programs or investments" they would "gain a return of approximately eight times or more on their original investment."

According to the indictment, Wong “from time to time ... told her investors to send their money directly to Africa made payable to various individuals ... involved in the oil investment program” and that investors could expect a return on their investments “within three to six months after they provided the funds.”

The document states that Wong told investors who complained they had not received any returns that “it would be only a slight delay until their funds were in hand.”

Wong allegedly deposited \$65,500 in bank transfers from investors’ accounts into her Homestreet Bank account in Honolulu, and the remainder of the funds in others’ accounts and by wire transfers to accounts under other names in Honolulu and Ghana. The document stated that investors’ funds came from Hawaii, California, New York and Nevada. Both investors and others receiving funds were identified by initials only.

“I think it’s fair to say that all of the victims had contact with Hawaii, but many of the victims lived in other places,” Osborne said.

Asked if Wong controlled the Ghana accounts or if there were co-conspirators overseas, Osborne replied: “I can’t comment on that at this point.”

After one investor had allegedly “lost thousands of dollars” and had moved from Hawaii to Pennsylvania, Wong “in late 2008 or early 2009 attempted to contact him ... to ask for even more money” and “tried to enlist” the investor’s father in her alleged scheme, according to the indictment.

Wong also allegedly told a prospective investor that if he invested \$65,000 “in an oil pipeline abroad” his return would be “approximately \$5 million.” She also reportedly told another investor that if he invested \$25,000, that he would receive \$25 million placed in a bank in Hong Kong, and a third investor that a \$60,000 investment in Dubai would net that individual \$2.5 million “within weeks.”

That same investor was told in March 2008 that another investor “had pulled out of the program” and that an additional \$90,000 “would result in realizing \$25.5 million in returns.” Wong allegedly said she would charter a plane to take that investor and others to Dubai “to obtain their profits on the investments.”

The alleged scheme apparently unraveled on April 11 this year, when Wong purportedly told a special agent of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security that “all investors would be paid in 45 days.” One month later, Wong allegedly “apologized for the delay” and told the agent that “everyone would be paid in the next two weeks.”

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