Angel Food Ministries Founders Enter Not Guilty Plea on Fraud Charges

The founders of a former Georgia-based food assistance ministry have pled not guilty on an array of charges, including using organization funds to buy jewelry, clothes, sporting goods, a classic car and make a down payment on a jet.

A 49-count indictment was filed in November against Angel Food Ministries founders Linda and Joe Wingo, their son, Andrew Wingo, and an employee, Harry Michaels. They have been charged with fraud, wire fraud and conspiracy to commit money laundering.

The FBI searched the Angel Food Ministries offices in 2009 after a federal investigation was opened against the Wingos. These are the first charges that have been brought against them.

Citing rising food and fuel costs, declining sales, and operational costs, the nonprofit organization shut its doors on Sept. 17.

The Wingos started Angel Food in 1994 with 34 families in Monroe, Ga., about 40 miles east of Atlanta. Through a network of churches, it fed more than 500,000 families a month in 45 states.

The ministry said families typically spent about $30 for an estimated $65 worth of groceries by ordering multi-meal boxes of meatballs, hams and other staples from monthly menus.

The 71-page indictment alleges that beginning in January 2003, the defendants used funds from the organization’s bank accounts for their own personal use without the board of directors' approval. The Wingos were making six-figure salaries at some points, according to tax records.

The Associated Press reports that the indictment also says Joe and Linda Wingo used other nonprofit organizations and for-profit companies they founded to funnel Angel Food's funds for their personal use and took actions "to cover up their illegal activities when they learned they were under investigation."

The indictment alleges the Wingos regularly used organization credit cards for personal expenses, used ministry funds to make a down payment on a jet that was leased back to the ministry, solicited kickbacks from vendors, and issued checks to themselves, family members and employees as bonuses not approved by the board.

Other instances of fraud listed in the indictment are: allegedly using the ministry's funds to make down payments on real estate and keeping proceeds from those properties; routing proceeds from the sale of extra inventory for personal use; giving employees bonuses and telling them to personally contribute to political candidates in the same amount of the bonuses.

Giving an example of how the defendants solicited kickbacks, prosecutors say Andy Wingo and Harry Michaels instructed vendors to increase the amount of their invoices to the organization to cover kickbacks. The vendors would direct the organization to pay the larger invoices, "knowing that the kickbacks had already been paid or would be paid in the near future," prosecutors say.

They also say Linda Wingo told one employee to remove and destroy the hard drive of a computer and tried to persuade employees not to give information to the FBI.

Prosecutors say the various charges filed carry fines of $250,000 to $500,000 for each count and a maximum prison sentence of five to 20 years.

If convicted, the Wingos will be forced to forfeit property they have illegally obtained and will need to give back a large undetermined amount of money. Joe Wingo could receive a 105-year prison sentence if convicted on all accounts, while his wife, Linda, is looking at a potential 85-year sentence.