

## ISTHMUS | The Daily Page

### **Karl Rove case witness killed in plane crash, sisters want answers**

Web guru was potential witness in Ohio voting fraud case

by Bill Lueders

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Shannon Connell of Madison says her brother Michael rarely talked about work. She knew he ran an Ohio company called New Media Communications that set up websites for Republicans including former President George H.W. Bush and Florida Gov. Jeb Bush. But it wasn't until after he died last December, when the small plane he was piloting crashed, that she learned via the Internet of his tie to a voter fraud case and to allegations that presidential adviser Karl Rove had made threats against him.

"At first, it was really hard for me to believe Mike was dead because somebody wanted him dead," says Shannon, a buyer for a local children's resale shop. "But as time goes on, it's hard for me *not* to believe there was something deliberate about it."

A native of Illinois, Shannon moved to Madison in 2002, the same year as her sister, Mary Jo Walker. Walker, a former Dane County Humane Society employee, has similar concerns about their brother's death: "It doesn't seem right to me at all."

Michael Connell — who died at age 45, leaving a wife and four kids — was a computer networking expert who lived near Akron. Last July 17, an attorney who's filed a federal civil rights lawsuit alleging a conspiracy to rig elections in Ohio held a press conference at which he identified Connell as a principal witness.

The attorney, Cliff Arnebeck of Columbus, Ohio, tells *Isthmus* he doesn't believe Connell was engaged in criminal activity but may have been a "data-processing implementer" for those who were. "I was told he was at the table when some criminal things were discussed."

A week after the press conference, on July 24, Arnebeck wrote U.S. Attorney General Michael Mukasey seeking protection for Connell, whom he said had been "threatened" by Rove, a key player in the campaigns of George W. Bush. Arnebeck says Connell was told through an intermediary that unless he agreed to "take the fall" for election fraud in Ohio, his wife [and New Media partner] faced prosecution for lobby law violations. There was no claim of a threat on Connell's person.

Arnebeck was permitted to depose Connell last Nov. 3. The portion of this deposition that dealt with the alleged threats was sealed, but Arnebeck is preparing a motion to make it all public. He affirms that Connell denied any involvement in voter fraud, but thinks Rove still had reason to regard him as a threat.

"The problem that Mike Connell represented is [he was] a guy of conscience," says Arnebeck. "If it came right down to it, he would not commit perjury." Arnebeck "absolutely" would have called Connell as a witness in his lawsuit.

Shannon and Mary Jo both say their brother, a devout Catholic, seemed upset in the weeks before his death. Mary Jo feels he was "stressed out and depressed" on his birthday last November; Shannon says he atypically did not respond to an email she'd sent.

On Dec. 19, Connell flew alone in his single-engine Piper Supercub from a small airport near Washington, D.C. The plane crashed on its final approach to his hometown Akron-Canton Airport, between two houses. The cause is still under investigation but is presumed accidental.

The blogosphere refuses to accept this. "Mike was getting ready to talk," writes one online journalist who labels Connell a source. "He was frightened."

Connell's widow has rejected such speculation. "He wasn't about to talk, because there was nothing to talk about," Heather Connell told the *Huffington Post*. "Nobody did anything wrong."

Shannon Connell, for her part, dismisses reports that her brother was warned not to fly, but still considers the crash that killed him "very suspicious." Michael was an experienced pilot, and his plane had recently been serviced. Plus there's the timing — "after the deposition and before the trial. It just seems very convenient."

Arnebeck goes further in suggesting foul play. "I have been told by multiple sources," he says, "that this plane crash was not an accident, and by multiple sources that the technology is available to bring down a plane in this way."

What's his evidence? Arnebeck repeatedly cites a recent online article by Minnesota emeritus professor Jim Fetzer. The article, datelined Madison and headlined "Has Cheney Been Murdering Americans?", mentions Connell along with other possible victims, including Sen. Paul Wellstone and Pat Tillman, the former NFL player killed in Afghanistan.

Michael Connell's sisters don't know what to believe. Says Shannon, "I really just want the truth to come out." So does Mary Jo, who doubts this will happen: "With so many things that people in power get away with in this country, I don't expect anyone to ever be named, much less prosecuted, in the death of my brother."

Links to referenced articles:

- "One of My Sources Died in a Plane Crash Last Night..." by Larisa Alexandrovna, 12/20/08
- Election Attorney Arnebeck Sent E-mail to Mukasey in July Warning of Threat Against Connell by Oregon Voter Rights Coalition, 12/22/08.
- "Mike Connell Was Warned Not to Fly Before Crash" by Wayne Madsen, *Online Journal*, 12/22/2008
- "The Intriguing Death of Top GOP Consultant Michael Connell" by Thomas B. Edsall, *Huffington Post*, 1/25/09
- "Has Cheney Been Murdering Americans?" by Jim Fetzer, OpEdNews, April 12, 2009
- Wikipedia entry on Michael Connell

### **A tale of two applicants**

Ron Trachtenberg was appalled. In a protest email to members of the city of Madison's Alcohol License Review Committee, the Madison attorney and former alderperson called it "a disaster" and "disgusting."

Trachtenberg was referring to a pair of bartender license applications heard by the ALRC on April 15. The first was for a 29-year-old woman he described as "cute, blonde, curvaceous, good breasts and articulate, with a killer smile." Her application had been flagged for review by the Madison Police Department because she failed to report a traffic violation and several administrative actions for noncompliance stemming from two OWIs she received in 2004 and 2005. (She also had past convictions for battery, bail jumping and marijuana possession.)

She explained, basically, that these just slipped her mind. That she had two OWIs and was seeking a bartender's license was remarked on by one committee member. But Madison Capt. Carl Gloede said this in itself would not have triggered a review, and the committee granted the license.

Next up was a 50-year-old man who needed a bartender license for a new job. He had no alcohol-related offenses and no one challenged the fullness of his disclosures. But he was convicted of growing pot in his home (a felony) in 2003, and had slightly older convictions for retail theft and disorderly conduct.

The man, who already has a job as an alcohol server, said he'd had an undiagnosed autism-related condition but has since been taking medication and become "a much better member of society." The ALRC rejected his application.

"The ALRC treats people really summarily," says Trachtenberg. "They're just really rough on them."

And it's true, there seems to be little logic to how the ALRC handled these two cases. Why should someone with an obvious drinking problem get a license and a guy busted for growing pot six years ago be denied? Could it be simply that the committee found one applicant more pleasing?

See if you can come up with a better theory: The back-to-back applications are archived on Madison City Channel ([www.cityofmadison.com/mcc12/index.html](http://www.cityofmadison.com/mcc12/index.html)), Part 1 of the ALRC's April 15 meeting, around the one-hour mark.

### **Throwing it all away**

It was last Wednesday, Earth Day, when *Isthmus* asked the U.S. Postal Service in Madison if it was no longer recycling large quantities of plastic wrap.

"I hope we're recycling it," said Karen Cronin, the post office's spokeswoman. "We try to recycle everything here, so that kind of surprises me."

It is kind of surprising. Until about a year ago, the post office was bundling and recycling the shrink wrap that magazines and other materials are sent in. According to one employee, "a couple of bins-full a day" of this wrap now gets thrown out with the trash, and a machine the post office bought for bundling it sits unused.

Cronin, after looking into the matter, called back to say the post office used to make money off this material, but then the market for such recyclables bottomed out. Her post-Earth Day take: "Due to budgetary constraints right now, we cannot pay extra to prepare the recycled materials and also pay to have it hauled away."

### **A new city motto?**

From Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's new memoir, on the years she spent in Madison in the early 1960s: "In Madison I was so cold I sometimes feared my tears would freeze."