Beat: News

New York woman arrested over Newtown massacre scam

-, 28.12.2012, 13:17 Time

USPA News - A New York City woman was arrested Thursday after allegedly collecting fraudulent "funeral fund" donations for a 6-year-old child who was killed in the Connecticut school shooting massacre, claiming in posts on the social networking website Facebook that she was his aunt. Nouel Alba, 37, of the Bronx, is accused of using a Facebook account, telephone calls and text messages to falsely claim to be a relative of one of the victims in the school shooting massacre and soliciting money from people who wanted to help.

She allegedly claimed the money would be used for the funeral of 6-year-old Noah Pozner. According to investigators, Alba used a Facebook account under the screen name Victorian Glam Fairys from which messages were posted on another Facebook user`s wall in response to information being reported about the shooting, which happened on December 14 at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. "All this killing and shooting this entire week is just crazy. Praying for those families and all the kids who are effected [sic] by this today. My heart goes out to those little innocent kids," said a message posted at 1:14 p.m. EST on December 14. It was followed by several other messages in which the person claimed to be a victim`s aunt. "All we know is 18 kids have been killed...still no word on my nephew," said a message posted about 15 minutes later. Other messages from the Victorian Glam Fairys account also claimed to have provided pictures to law enforcement officers in Newtown to help identify the victims. The scam continued the following day when Alba, allegedly using the Victorian Glam Fairys account, posted a message in which she claimed to have set up a funeral fund for her brother and families. "We like to thank everyone for your prayers. We ask that you continue to not just pray for us but for the families who have lost their kid," said the posting, which also included PayPal information and bank details. In response to the message, several people who were interested in making a donation to the families of the victims reached out through the Victorian Glam Fairys account and asked for contact information. Alba then allegedly spoke with one unidentified donor victim from New York while using her own telephone number. During the phone conversation, Alba allegedly claimed to have had to go to Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown and enter the crime scene to identify her nephew for law enforcement personnel. In reality, however, family members were not allowed to enter the school at the time because it was being processed for evidence by the Connecticut State Police. Court documents also detail text messages which Alba allegedly sent to the same donor. Asked if she was watching in person an emotional speech by President Barack Obama at Newtown High School, Alba allegedly replied: "No im [sic] sitting in my car. Emotionally I cant [sic] deal.with it right now...tomorrow ill [sic] see [Noah Pozner] in a casket and that will be hard enough to handle." Alba in other text messages claimed to have met Obama during his visit to Newtown on December 16, just two days after the massacre. "Im [sic] sure hell [sic] give a good speech. He met with us hugged us even cryd [sic] with us. Hes. Really down to earth," one text message claimed. The following day, in response to a text from the donor to ask how she was doing emotionally, Alba allegedly responded: "Ima [sic] mess. Not looking forward to see that casket cause that is what will kill us all today. 11 gun shot in his little body or take those bullets. The guilt we have just keeps building up." Using this scheme, Alba is believed to have received donations in her PayPal account from December 15 through December 18. The court documents implied there were at least three people who fell victim to the scam, but no exact number was provided. It is also unclear how much money Alba received through the scam. But Alba unexpectedly refunded all the donations on the evening of December 18, a day before CNN`s Anderson Cooper 360 program broadcast a story which focused on Alba as being involved in a scam regarding the shooting massacre. Alba denied the allegations to reporters and said other people she interacted with on Facebook had tried to set her up. Last week, Alexis Haller, the uncle of Pozner, denied knowing the person responsible for the scam in an interview with NBC News. "I`m disgusted by it. I think it`s disgusting behavior," he said. "It`s trying to turn a profit on a horrible tragedy, on the death of kids .. And to me, that`s just a horrible thing to be doing." Alba, who was advised that lying to a FBI Special Agent is a federal crime, told FBI Special Agents by telephone on December 21 that she did not post anything on her Victorian Glam Fairys account. She allegedly claimed she only used the account to post craft-related items and said she did not know that her PayPal account was being used to solicit donations for the family of Pozner. "Alba claimed that she believed two individuals with whom she had prior negative experiences on Facebook had accessed her account and posted information claiming that Alba was related to one of the victims." investigators said in a criminal complaint. Alba also claimed she did not know the password to her PayPal account, stating that it had been inactive for a long time, even though a Bronx-registered IP address accessed it on December 14, before the donation request was made. The woman also told the interviewing FBI Special Agents that she immediately logged into her PayPal account and refunded the donations whenever she received an email notification from PayPal. In fact, according to investigators, Alba did not return the donated funds until 8.30 p.m. EST on December 18. As a result of the apparently false statements, Alba was arrested on Thursday after being charged with one count of Lying to a Federal Agent. She was later arraigned in U.S. District Court in Hartford and released after posting $50,000 bail,

but she still faces potential federal charges such as wire fraud, access device fraud, and interstate transportation of stolen property. "This arrest should serve as a warning to anyone who attempts to profit from this tragedy by contriving fraudulent schemes that exploit the many victims, their families and individuals who sincerely want to help," said David Fein, U.S. Attorney for the District of Connecticut. "Investigators continue to monitor the Internet to uncover other fundraising scams arising from this tragedy, and the individuals operating them face federal or state prosecution to the fullest extent permitted by law." Kimberly Mertz, the Special Agent in Charge of the FBI`s New Haven Division, said it is "unconscionable" to think that families of the victims in Newtown have become the targets of criminals. "Today`s arrest is a stern message that the FBI will investigate and bring to justice those who perpetrate Internet fund raising scams, especially those scams that exploit the most vulnerable in their time of shared sorrow," she said. If convicted of making false statements to federal agents, Alba faces a maximum term of imprisonment of five years and a fine of up to $250,000. If she is also charged and eventually convicted of wire fraud, access device fraud, and interstate transportation of stolen property, Alba could face an additional 40 years in prison. The massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, a town about 7 miles (11 kilometers) east of Danbury in Connecticut, resulted in the deaths of 20 young children and six adults, making it the second-deadliest mass shooting in U.S. history. The gunman, who also killed his mother before the school shooting, then took his own life.

Article online:
https://www.uspa24.com/bericht-368/new-york-woman-arrested-over-newtown-massacre-scam.html

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