

Houston-based company denies scholarships to honor students

HOUSTON (AP) — They were, without a doubt, the best and brightest high school seniors in the country: straight-A students, National Merit Scholars, their class valedictorians.

One student from every state in the nation and the District of Columbia, connected by a common thread: All applied for and won a \$3,000-a-year college scholarship, known as the AdamsVision award, from a Houston-based AdamsVision USA. There was just one problem. AdamsVision now admits there is no money — never was.

Now the students, having completed their first semester at college, are scrambling for financial assistance while their parents are searching for answers and, in some cases, lawyers.

AdamsVision founder Val Adams insists he still is trying to raise up money to honor the students.

"I'm very saddened that we're in the point that we are, but at the same time I'm very hopeful that we will get these scholarships returned and be able to continue our commitment," Adams said. "This is a good thing we were trying to do."

But information uncovered by Adams and the scholarship trustee raises questions about whether it was a legitimate effort to reward good students or a scam perpetrated by a man with a rap sheet full of financial crimes.

"Based on my contact with

him, I would be concerned if he were in any business where anyone was relying on his promises," said John Boone, a prosecutor with the Harris County district attorney's office.

Boone described Adams as a habitual criminal, convicted of theft for writing bogus checks in 1980, 1981, 1985, 1987, 1993 and 1995. Adams remains on probation for a 1993 case.

"His schemes were fairly grandiose," Boone said. "The least

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— Val Adams
AdamsVision founder

serious of scams he was doing he had some sort of a fake business, and he would use checks from the business basically just to live well."

Boone said Adams may have had legitimate enterprises but that "typically there would be no substance behind the business. It would just be a front."

Adams acknowledges his criminal past but maintains the scholarship effort was on the level. He notes that the students were not asked to pay an application fee or provide any money, something the

students and their parents confirm.

And he insists he invested \$300,000 for expenses such as salaries for the professional educators who selected the recipients.

"If I spent \$300,000 to shyster somebody, that's my response to that. I don't think anybody in their right mind would do that," he said.

The scholarships, he said, were the company's primary focus.

In fall 1997, AdamsVision sent applications for its "Scholar-Leadership Award" to every high school in the country. An attached letter promised the awards would be presented to the winners by the governor of their state at a musical event at the Grand Ole Opry House in Nashville.

Eligible students had to have at least a 3.0 grade-point average, a combined SAT score of 1160 or above and submit an essay and three letters of recommendation.

Jean Lockhart, a former teacher Adams hired as a consultant on the project, assembled 15 educators in December 1997 to select the winners.

She said Adams assured her from the start that the scholarship money was in place. But Lockhart became suspicious after Adams, despite his contention, failed to pay her and the educators who selected the students.

On Jan. 8, 1998, letters were sent to 51 students announcing they had won, including Texas recipient Justin Burt of Uvalde, who

now attends Notre Dame.

But their elation turned to confusion a few months later when AdamsVision dispatched another letter saying funding for the scholarships was not yet complete.

The letter stated AdamsVision was negotiating with "two major corporations" regarding sponsorship of the awards presentation and that, although funding was incomplete, it remained "absolutely confident we will receive corporate sponsorship."

At that point, however, many students already had accepted early placement with universities. Additionally, some had lost out on other scholarships after winning one so large.

About a month before classes began, AdamsVision sent another round of letters to each winner's university, informing them that the scholarship would be paid in \$5,000 increments at the end of each semester.

Then came the final blow.

Last month, Adams sent a two-paragraph letter to each university stating simply that AdamsVision "will not be financially capable of honoring the Scholar-Leadership Award at this time."

Adams said he is continuing to try to get corporations to bankroll the scholarships and provided as proof correspondence with dozens of firms, including Sony, Ford, Time Warner and locally based Houston Industries, now called Reliant Energy.

Pilot union refuses to yield to judge's orders

DALLAS (AP) — More than half of the American Airlines pilots participating in a sickout have taken themselves off the sick list, but it is not enough to prevent 550 flights from being canceled Sunday.

Another 231 flights, or about 10 percent, of flights scheduled for the Presidents Day holiday on Monday have already been canceled because not all of the pilots were immediately available for flying.

The mass return followed a judge's contempt order Saturday against the pilots union and two of its top officials.

An American spokeswoman said "well under 1,000" of the 9,400 pilots were still shown sick on Sunday, compared to the nearly 2,500 ursday and Friday, when one in four pilots declared themselves unfit to fly.

"We're just glad they are coming back and

we hope by the end of the week to be in business as usual here," added Sonja Whitemon, saying the airline could be offering close to 100 percent service as soon as Tuesday.

According to American, about 40 pilots per hour have been taking themselves off of the sick list since a federal judge held the Allied Pilots Association and two top board members in contempt and promised sizable fines against them.

U.S. District Judge Joe Kendall said Saturday that the union did not do enough to encourage pilots to return to work after his court order.

More than half a million travelers have been left at the gate by the nation's second-largest airline because of the large number of pilots calling in sick.

Despite the continued cancellations, most of

the nation's airports were calmer Sunday with many passengers prepared for delays.

At Miami International Airport, heart-shaped decorations adorned American's baggage counter wall Sunday, and musicians strolled through the terminal serenading passengers. But many travelers remained angry.

Kendall said he would decide Wednesday how much to levy in fines, although he promised they would be substantial. He required the union to place \$10 million with the court and for union president Rich LaVoy and vice president Brian Mayhew to remit a total of \$15,000.

"I'm the guy who gets to stick his chin out there. I'm trying to protect the careers of these pilots," said LaVoy, who told pilots in a hotline to continue to call crew scheduling to get off of the sick list.

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