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Former L.A. City Council aide, wife acquitted of embezzlement in corruption case

By MARISA GERBER MAR 22, 2016 | 2:48 PM



Longtime lobbyist Robert Katherman Jr., pictured, and his wife were acquitted of corruption charges. (Robert Gauthier / Los Angeles Times)

A jury Tuesday acquitted a longtime Los Angeles lobbyist and former L.A. City Council aide accused of corruption, rejecting charges that he and his wife participated in a scheme to help an elected water board member siphon thousands of dollars in public money for personal use.

After more than two days of deliberation in a Torrance courthouse, jurors found Robert Katherman Jr., 69, and his wife, Marilyn, 67, not guilty of felony counts of misappropriation of public funds and embezzlement.

A third defendant, Ronald Craig Smith, treasurer of the West Basin Municipal Water District, pleaded guilty in 2014 to embezzling nearly \$20,000 from the agency.

Los Angeles County prosecutors alleged that Smith, 56, persuaded the water agency to give paid sponsorships to a Torrance-based nonprofit, Adopt a Stormdrain Foundation. The Kathermans were members of the nonprofit's board, the district attorney's office said.

The couple, prosecutors argued, steered money to Smith, who used the funds to pay for tennis and dance lessons for his children and to fix his boat. Smith was sentenced to 180 days in jail.

Cathy Beauregard, a former board member of Adopt a Stormdrain Foundation and a key witness for the prosecution at trial, said she started becoming suspicious of Katherman in 2010. She questioned him about where the nonprofit's money was going and said his answers were vague.

"He kind of danced me around," said Beauregard, a bookkeeper, who eventually told

"Unbelievable," she said. "I have no faith in the justice system anymore."

Robert Katherman's attorney, Mark Werksman, praised the jury's decision, but said he wasn't surprised by the verdict.

"The D.A.'s case was full of holes and lies," he said. "We're relieved that this nightmare is over."

Werksman said Smith – his client's former friend – took advantage of Katherman and tricked him into thinking the money from the nonprofit was going to educational grants and programs.

"He was duped by an admitted thief," Werksman said.

Glen Jonas, Marilyn Katherman's attorney, said his client was innocent, adding that he believes prosecutors only charged her to convince her husband to plead guilty.

"The public integrity division of the D.A.'s office," he said, "completely lacked integrity in refusing to dismiss the charges against Marilyn Katherman."

Jonas said he argued during the trial that Beauregard, the bookkeeper, misused money from the nonprofit before falsely implicating the Kathermans.

Beauregard scoffed at the accusation.

"I'm not worried," she said. "Every penny that I ever spent I told [Katherman] about."

A district attorney's spokeswoman declined to comment.

Robert Katherman resigned as an aide to Councilman Curren Price when the charges were

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Marisa Gerber covers Los Angeles County's criminal courts. She previously wrote about the central L.A. neighborhoods of Hollywood, Silver Lake, Los Feliz, Echo Park and Downtown. Before joining the Los Angeles Times in 2012, she reported for the New York Times, OC Weekly and the Arizona Daily Star in Tucson. Marisa grew up in Nogales, Ariz., and graduated from the University of Arizona.

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