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Dundee Campaign Donation Probed

By Tim Rogers

Tico Times Staff

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In the latest chapter of the campaign finance scandal involving President Abel Pacheco, the office of Patriotic Parliamentary Bloc congressman Humberto Arce confirmed yesterday that it is looking into reports that Narvin Lichfield, owner of the defunct tough-love Dundee Ranch Academy, donated $10,000 to the President's election bid.

Arce, a vocal leader on the congressional committee investigating campaign finance irregularities, was asked by regional child-advocacy group Casa Alianza to look into the possibly irregular contribution following a Nov. 28 report in The Tico Times, in which Lichfield admitted he donated to Pacheco's campaign.

Lichfield acknowledged in a phone interview with The Tico Times last month that he had donated money to Pacheco's campaign, and had appealed to the President for help when his academy was forced to close in May on allegations of children's rights abuses.

Foreign campaign donations are illegal under Costa Rica's Electoral Code.

The Pacheco campaign team, however, managed to skirt finance regulations by creating a parallel fund-raising structure to handle irregular donations that were never reported to the Supreme Elections Tribunal (TSE), as required by law.

Although Lichfield admitted to the donation, a Tico Times' investigation of TSE campaign-finance records turned up no such financial contribution either in the name of Lichfield, his Costa Rican wife, academy director Joe Atkin, Dundee Ranch Academy, Rancho Dundee, or the WorldWide Association of Specialty Programs.

Dundee Ranch Academy, a behavior-modification program for wayward U.S. teenagers, was closed May 24 following two government interventions to investigate allegations of rights abuse (TT, Oct. 25, 2002; Jan. 17, March 14, May 23, 30). Lichfield was arrested and jailed for 24 hours, before being released on conditional freedoms.

Pacheco is currently out of the country and the Casa Presidencial did not respond to The Tico Times inquiries by press time yesterday.

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