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Among Floridians granted clemency by Trump: rich elites, rappers, an elderly pot dealer

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Who did Trump pardon in Florida? Here's the clemency list

President Donald Trump's final list of pardons and sentence commutations includes several people with South Florida ties.

Two were high-profile rappers convicted of weapons-related charges in Miami. One was an influential Miami Beach banker and philanthropist whose name adorns buildings across South Florida. Another was a wealthy Palm Beach eye doctor convicted of a massive Medicare fraud scam.

One was an elderly man who'd been sent to prison for life for dealing pot.

They were among the Floridians who got clemency from President Donald Trump early Wednesday, in the final hours of his presidency. In all, the president doled out over 100 pardons and commutations, some to well-known political allies like **Steve Bannon** and **Elliott Broidy**, a top fundraiser for Republicans.

Some of the cases had only passing ties to Florida — like **Robert Bowker**, who was convicted in New York nearly three decades ago for illegally trafficking in wildlife. Bowker, now an animal conservationist, had illegally arranged to buy 22 snakes being housed at the old Miami Serpentarium, a reptile refuge that closed in 1984.

Others who had been hoping to get clemency didn't. Among them: Rich Mendez, a Miami Latin music mogul who last year began serving a five-year sentence in a wire-fraud case. Despite support from several Trump allies — like former New York City police commissioner Bernie Kerik and Newsmax broadcaster John Cardillo — Mendez did not make the final cut.

Rich Mendez, CEO of Rich Music Inc, at his studio in Wynwood. Rich Music is a boutique independent record label, aimed at cultivating upcoming Latin music talent. Mendez is fighting a stiff prison sentence in Texas for a white-collar crime. BY **AL DIAZ**

Among those Floridians who did get pardons:

- **Lil Wayne**, the former Miami Beach resident and international hip-hop star who pleaded guilty last month to a federal weapons charge. During the election season, Lil Wayne was one of the few prominent hip-hop artists to voice support for the polarizing president, even tweeting a photo of the two together in October.

The president pardoned Lil Wayne, whose real name is Dwayne Carter, a little more than a month after the rapper pleaded guilty to illegally possessing a gold-plated pistol aboard a private jet in Miami. Lil Wayne had yet to be sentenced.

- **Abel Holtz**, the philanthropist and banker whose name is featured on a downtown Miami street, a children's hospital at Jackson Memorial and a tennis center in Miami Beach. The former founder of Capital Bank pleaded guilty in 1994 to lying to a federal grand jury about making secret payments to a famously corrupt Miami Beach mayor.

According to a White House statement, Trump's pardon of Holtz was supported by Republican Congressman Mario Diaz-Balart along with friends and business colleagues in the greater Miami community.

- **Robert "Bob" Zangrillo**, a prominent Miami developer who was charged in the infamous Varsity Blues scandal that brought down wealthy parents who illegally paid to get their children into elite universities.

Federal prosecutors alleged that Zangrillo made illicit payments of \$250,000 to get his daughter into the University of Southern California. He denied the claims and his trial was scheduled for September.

Zangrillo, the CEO of the Miami-based investment firm Dragon Global and one of the main investors in the Magic City Innovation District in Little Haiti, stepped away from the project to tend to his legal woes. The White House described him as a "well-respected business leader and philanthropist."

- **Todd Farha, William Kale, Thaddeus Bereday, Paul Behrens and Peter Clay**, who are former executives with Tampa's WellCare Health Care. They were convicted of Medicare fraud in 2013.

The White House's statement downplayed the case, saying it was a "widely cited as a case study in overcriminalization" and that the men had the support of organizations such as the CATO Institute and the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers.

Federal prosecutors said the men overbilled the government by at least \$30 million. A judge sentenced Farha to serve three years in prison and pay a \$50,000 fine, while Behrens got two years and William Kale just over one year.

Among those Floridians who got their sentences commuted:

- **Dr. Salomon Melgen**, of Palm Beach County, who was convicted of Medicare fraud almost four years ago. The eye doctor was a close friend of Sen. Bob Menendez, D-New Jersey, in a separate corruption case that ended with a hung jury.

Melgen, 66, once a wealthy South Florida ophthalmologist, had never been a campaign donor to the Republican Party.

According to a White House statement, Melgen's clemency petition was supported by Menendez, U.S. Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart, R-Miami, and numerous members of Brigade 2506, a Cuban exile group, along with friends, family, and former employees and patients.

▪ **Kodak Black**, the South Florida rapper convicted of lying on a federal form about his criminal past in order to buy a gun at a Hialeah firearms store. Trump pointed to support from various religious leaders, Baltimore Ravens star Lamar Jackson and rappers Gucci Mane, Lil Pump and Lil Yachty.

A Miami federal judge had sentenced Kodak Black to three years and ten months, far less than the maximum 10-year sentence he could have received. He's served about half of his sentence.

▪ **Luis Fernando Sicard**, who was arrested in Miami in 1999 on allegations of armed cocaine drug trafficking. He'd already served more than two decades behind bars, was due to be released in 2024.

Last year, the 58-year-old former Marine asked to be released from prison because of the COVID-19 pandemic and because many of his family members were suffering from health problems. Court documents show he had a clean history in prison, volunteers as an inmate "puppy program" and even works in a prison mechanic shop that services government cars.

"I am truly repentant for what I did and ask for a second chance to prove myself," he wrote in a letter last year to the judge.

His commutation was supported by Acting Attorney General Jeffrey Rosen and the Office of the Pardon Attorney.

▪ **John Knock**, 73, who was serving a life sentence for a non-violent federal marijuana trafficking charge out of Gainesville.

His case had long been championed by justice reform advocates. His sentence was lambasted as a vestige of the stiff drug sentencing laws of the 1990s. His plea for clemency was denied under President Obama, even as marijuana has since been legalized in many states in recent years.

"After 24 years, John Knock, a non-violent, first time offender sentenced to two life sentences without the opportunity of parole for marijuana only offenses, is coming home. This could not have happened without the tireless efforts of his sister, Beth Curtis, and the many outstanding advocacy organizations that took up the cause.," said his lawyer, David Holland.

"Today John Knock is headed home after a grant of mercy having suffered the draconian trial penalty and sentences of a bygone era for having challenged the government by taking his case to trial."

▪ **Fred "Dave" Clark**, formerly of Monroe County, had served six years of a 40-year sentence for running a multimillion-dollar Ponzi scheme. He ran the Cay Clubs Resorts and Marinas, which defrauded about 1,400 investors who believed their money was going to turn rundown properties into resorts.

Instead, Clark stole money to bankroll his lavish lifestyle. One investor who lost her life savings told the Tampa Bay Times last week that the original sentence was just.

"I thought well he will probably die in prison and he deserved it," Kimball Pugmire told the newspaper. "I was thinking that's justice because now he can sit there the rest of his life contemplating what he's done to other people."

▪ **Marquis Dargon**, of Tampa, who had been imprisoned since 2008 on a charge of conspiring to distribute cocaine.