

TPMMuckraker

O'Keefe And The Gang: The Young Conservatives Who Tried To Punk CNN

Rachel Slajda | September 29, 2010, 4:58PM

Recommend

135

135

Share

28

tweets

29

retweet



James O'Keefe

Read More

Ben Wetmore, CNN, Izzy Santa, James O'Keefe, John Burns, Joseph Basel

Share



EMAIL TO A FRIEND!

When CNN reporter Abbie Boudreau flew to Maryland to meet with James O'Keefe, she thought she was meeting him in his office to talk about a documentary she was working on about young conservatives. Instead, she found herself at his house, where his organization's executive director was near tears as she warned Boudreau that O'Keefe **was trying to lure her onto his boat** in order to seduce her in front of hidden cameras in order to "punk" CNN.

Boudreau left, and CNN ran the story today. We already know plenty about the main character: O'Keefe is the Andrew Breitbart protege who secretly filmed meetings between himself, posing as a pimp, and ACORN employees. The videos were a big part of what caused ACORN's demise as a national organization that helped low- and middle-income families find housing and register to vote. He also **pleaded guilty** earlier this year with three friends to charges of entering government property under false pretenses, after the four posed as telephone repairmen and videotaped themselves fiddling with the phones in Sen. Mary Landrieu's office.

But who were his alleged co-conspirators, who CNN says O'Keefe emailed with about the plan?

[TPM SLIDESHOW: Ambush 'Filmmaker' James O'Keefe: From The ACORN Sting To Failed CNN Punking]

There's Izzy Santa, who was the executive director of O'Keefe's Project Veritas until she warned Boudreau of O'Keefe's scheme. Santa is still on the payroll there, **according to her lawyer**, but has been scrubbed from the **web site**.

Santa worked briefly for the Cato Institute, co-writing a **piece called "Waging War On Black Teens,"** which argued that the minimum wage was causing high unemployment, especially for African-Americans. She also **produced a video** arguing against the "government monopoly" on schools.

Then there's Ben Wetmore, who allegedly wrote the **13-page document** outlining the planned punk -- using such charming phrases as "This bubble-headed-bleach-blonde who comes on at five will get a taste of her own medicine."

We **wrote about Wetmore in February**, after the *Times* reported that Wetmore let O'Keefe and friends stay at his place while they were illegally entering Landrieu's office.

The two go way back: Wetmore hired O'Keefe a few years ago to the Leadership Institute, a group that trains college conservatives on starting their own alternative newspapers. O'Keefe **wrote a blurb** for a book Wetmore wrote called *Getting A Job In Politics And Keeping It*.

"As someone who has worked with and around Ben for many years, I can say that his advice and wisdom within this book well prepares any politically-minded person to make themselves valuable and noticed by organizations and campaigns," O'Keefe wrote.

It was Wetmore who O'Keefe asked, **via email**, "Ben, you think I could get her on the boat?"

O'Keefe also emailed with another conservative activist about the planned stunt, someone CNN identified as Jonathon Burns of St. Louis, Mo.

He appears to be the same person, also known as John Burns, who **started a tea party offshoot** in February called **Citizens for Better Transit**. The group fought against an expansion of public transportation in St. Louis. They raised \$750, and apparently folded in April.

Burns also brought O'Keefe, and **co-phone-tampering-conspirator Joseph Basel**, to events in St. Louis. At one, they joined Young Americans for Liberty at the Washington University campus and **built a "gulag"** to protest against socialism. At another, they reportedly sabotaged a gay rights protest by writing "Free Abortions" on their signs.

Burns is also the **St. Louis field rep for American Majority**. American Majority is a national "grassroots" group that trains tea partiers. They recently held an event with a former ACORN employee and whistleblower, where they handed out pamphlets urging people to try to catch voter fraud in the act by hanging out at welfare offices and bus stops.

None of the people involved returned our calls, except for Wetmore, who responded to our email, "People still watch CNN?"