Cianci Sauce Made No Money for Charity in 4 Years

MICHELLE R. SMITH, Associated Press

PROVIDENCE, R.I. (AP) — Former Providence, Rhode Island Mayor Buddy Cianci's face beams from the label of his Mayor's Own Marinara Sauce, which also promises that sales are "Benefiting Providence School Children" and have helped hundreds of students attend college.

But in recent years, no money from the sauce's sales has been donated to Cianci's charity scholarship fund, The Associated Press has learned. From 2009 to 2012, the sauce made a total of $3 in income, longtime Cianci adviser Charles Mansolillo told the AP.

Mansolillo — Cianci's former city solicitor and the vice president, secretary and treasurer of the company that sells the pasta sauce — acknowledged the label could be misunderstood and said he would like to see it changed.

"People are thinking that every time they are buying a bottle of pasta (sauce) they're making a contribution. That is not necessarily the case. That's got to be clearly stated," Mansolillo said. "It benefits the scholarship fund when it's possible. ... I don't think even in the best year any more than two or three scholarships could be said to come from that."

Cianci was mayor for a combined 21 years over two separate stints starting in 1975. Both ended in felony convictions. He started selling the sauce in 1995, during his second go-round as mayor and before he was sent to prison in 2002 for presiding over widespread corruption in City Hall. He is now running again for his old job as an independent.

The ex-mayor said he puts money into the sauce every year and has never personally made money on it. He said expenses such as labels, taxes and insurance eat away profits many years. Even if the sauce loses money some years, it's great publicity for the scholarship, and, admittedly, for himself, he acknowledged.

"There's a certain public relations aspect to it all to me, I can't deny that," Cianci told the AP.

In 1994, Cianci set up a fund that awards scholarships to college-bound high school seniors from Providence. This year, 13 students received the $1,000 scholarship. A press release dated June 8 states, "The scholarships are funded from a portion of the sales from The Mayor's Own Marinara sauce."

Mansolillo is also president of the scholarship fund, and he told the AP that they always intended to use the income to supplement the scholarship fund. The fund

currently has about $500,000 in assets, he said.

In 2009, they lost $2,200 on the sauce, Mansolillo said. The following year, they made $2,974, while in 2011, they lost $2,969. In 2012, they made $2,198 profit, he said. That adds up to a profit of just $3 during the 4-year period.

Much of the money currently in the fund came from previous fundraising efforts, such as golf tournaments, as well as sales of the pasta sauce, Cianci and Mansolillo said.

The fund now makes most of its income from investments and has received only $450 in contributions since 2005, according to forms filed with the IRS.

In that sense, Mansolillo said, past sauce sales are benefiting Providence school children today. But he also acknowledged that the meaning of the line "Benefiting Providence School Children" might not be entirely clear to consumers.

"At the end of the day, I think we should just take it off," he said. "It's giving an impression that possibly we're going to the bank on this. That we're banking our scholarship on this when we're not, and we don't have to."

Newman's Own, the food company founded by the late actor Paul Newman, gives all after-tax profits to charity, something it specifically states on its label. Mansolillo said Capital Innovations, the company that sells Cianci's sauce and where Cianci serves as president, was intentionally vague on the label and didn't make specific promises because, "We didn't want to be held to anything."

Cianci and Mansolillo said sales have been hurt in past years by mismanagement from some of the sauce's previous distributors, one of which went bankrupt. During the time when Cianci was in prison from 2002 to 2007, the sauce sometimes was not on the shelves at all.

When asked why they continue to make the sauce when it has not benefited the charity in years, Mansolillo said they are hopeful that things are going to do better and that it benefits the economy by providing jobs to the people who make it and distribute it.

"It's a good product, and a lot of people like it," Cianci said.

Bob Borges, gourmet manager at Eastside Market in Providence, said the sauce sells well at his store, which goes through about a dozen 12-jar cases a month. He said he thinks first-time purchasers might buy it because they think sales are benefiting children, but they wouldn't get the repeat sales they get unless it was good. They sell it for $5.69 per jar.

The sauce is sold in Rhode Island and Massachusetts and at two stores in New York, said Kristen Catanzaro of Catanzaro Food Products, the company that has manufactured and distributed it since 2010. She said Cianci's sauce helps the company, the last one in the state that manufactures pasta sauce.

She said sales have gotten a bump since Cianci announced he would get into the mayor's race in June.

Mansolillo said sales of the sauce have never produced the income they had hoped for.

"In the overall scheme of things," he said, "it really hasn't worked out very well."

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