

## Captain George flies head first into scams galore

George Kahak probably shouldn't be allowed near his mailbox.

The mail that comes to his Fort Worth home promises the former chief pilot for American Airlines what he wants most: more money.

After 40 years of flying, Kahak retired, but he put much of his retirement money in bad investments, including some with a financial adviser who went bankrupt.

Now 85, he looks for ways to stretch his remaining dollars. Each day, he reads his mail and studies the promises of prizes, giveaways, easy work-at-home jobs, investment opportunities and whatnot.

So much sounds believable, he says, marveling, "Boy, they've got some good writers." His wife, Margaret, tells him not to do it, but he doesn't listen.

He says that in the past few years he has made "investments" in two dozen entities, spending anywhere from \$10 to \$7,500. He acknowledges that he loses every time. Still, he can't stop himself. He is looking for that golden goose.

"He's such a sweet guy, so good-natured that he would give you the shirt off his back," his wife says.

That's exactly what he's losing. But Kahak is the first to admit that he can't help himself. Financial exploitation of the elderly is pervasive, unyielding and growing alongside technology that makes it easier to perpetrate scams, the Federal Trade Commission reports.

Kahak is an extreme example. But unlike most older Americans who are embarrassed to talk about their losses, Kahak says he wants to share his story so others can understand what he is now beginning to see:

Nothing comes easy.

We met one day after he asked for help sorting through his mail for a legitimate proposal. Seconds into his mail pile, I knew it all was too good to be true. A sampling (in the hustlers' own words):

“A stock that triples every month for six months no matter what the market is doing.”

“The secret to getting free money now.”

“Put \$50,000 in your pocket in just 30 days.”

Many of the envelopes carry Kahak’s handwritten notations about the date he mailed in money.

He fell hard for letters that said he won a prize: “They make it sound great,” he says. “Your check is already made out to you. Just send in the fee. We’ll send you the check. But that’s the last you hear from them.”

He is mired in a pyramid scheme: “Your name is on the bottom, but when your name comes up, you make all this money,” he explains. “The guys above me are making \$800,000. It sounds beautiful.” Alas, he’s stuck down low.

He’s an oil man: “This one outfit is going to drill in Alaska, and I’ll clean up. They own so many hundreds of thousands of acres right where the oil is. And they made it sound like pretty soon I was going to make money on that. I haven’t made a penny.”

He paid to learn how to win the Powerball lottery: “I don’t think I ever heard anything from them.”

He spent \$39.95 for a system showing him how to be a millionaire: “They get your money, and that’s it.”

“I’m just a glutton for punishment,” he says sheepishly.

His biggest investment is his worst.

Two representatives called him to sell him a yearlong commitment to an Internet advertising company.

Their company, New Age Marketing Solutions of Phoenix, promises to create Web pages for him that act as “affiliates” of more established companies like Amazon and eBay, they said.

Kahak doesn’t own a computer and doesn’t surf the Internet. But that didn’t matter. “Those guys really talked me into it. They were telling me that everybody orders off computers.”

The price was \$14,000 to join, but they liked Kahak, he recalls them saying, so they cut the price by almost half.

“They really sounded honest. It was just before Christmas and they said, ‘Oh man, you’re going to make a pile before Christmas on Yahoo and eBay.’ ”

He didn’t listen to his wife. He spent \$7,500 to cover his first year for Internet advertising. His earnings since then?

Zero.

I called the company. Supervisor Kimberly Johnson told me, “If he knew the business wasn’t right for him, he shouldn’t have signed up for it.”

He can cancel and receive a refund of \$108, which represents his signup fee, she said.

What about the rest of the \$7,500?

“The advertising cost is not refundable,” she said.

The Better Business Bureau in Phoenix lists the company as having a satisfactory rating.

Kahak is thinking about getting a job now, preferably a home-based one because, after a recent stroke, he walks with a cane.

The offers for those jobs come in the mail, too.

“I called that outfit that puts toys together,” he says. “They pay you \$500 a week. That’s a couple of thousand a month. I may do that.”

John Haun, a case manager at Senior Citizen Services in Fort Worth, says older Americans sometimes need help to overcome their losses and learn how to protect themselves.

“It’s like being a gambler,” he says.

He suggests that conversations with telephone solicitors begin this way:

“Before we go any further, I need to know your name, name of your company and your phone number so I can call you back.” Legitimate companies will comply.

Haun adds: “If you want to do business with someone, you look them up in the phone book, you call, and you know what you’re doing. If somebody calls you out of the blue, you don’t know anything about them. You’re at a huge disadvantage.”

George Kahak promises to stop being the ultimate mark. But he doesn’t sound sure.

“I just about quit doing it anymore,” he says halfheartedly. “I just keep hoping that something will come through, but nothing ever does.”