



STANDS FOR HOUSTON

KHOU 11 News I-Team investigates Quanell X

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HOUSTON—He’s a media magnet who has spoken out against racism, injustice and police brutality for more than a decade. But the KHOU 11 News I-Team has discovered that sometimes the help of Quanell X comes with a price—a price paid by the very people who need him and, in some cases, who end up feeling cheated.

Sandra Laday is one of them.

“I was grieving over Kevin’s death,” she said.

It was May 2009. Her son Kevin Laday had just died in the custody of the Lumberton police, a town just outside of Beaumont. Sandra Laday felt the circumstances were murky and unclear.

Needing answers, she got hold of the man known as a guardian of the black community.

But she also got a surprise—Quanell X told her she would have to pay him—in cash and fast.

“It would cost me about \$2,500 or \$3,500,” Laday said. “It’s like he wanted it the next day and wanted me to wire it to him.”

Laday said she was told the fee was for a private investigator. But living on a fixed income, she said she told Quanell X there was no way she could scrape up that kind of money.

“So he said, ‘We’ll come down, but you’ll need \$600,’” Laday said.

But what happened, said Laday, was something she didn’t want or need—a 30-minute protest rally—instead of a full-blown investigation into her son’s death.

“I shouldn’t have contacted him because it didn’t do me any good,” Laday said. “I feel like I’ve been taken advantage of.”

Another mother, Hilda Pete, said she got a whole lot less after paying a whole lot more.

“He’s going to get your money and don’t do nothing for you,” Pete said. “He’s a con-artist.”

Pete’s son, Joe Nathan Sanders, was convicted of capital murder in 2007. Believing he was innocent, Pete approached Quanell X for help and said he also soon brought up money.

Pete said at first he asked for \$3,500 to investigate her son's case, but eventually needed more. In all, Pete claims she paid the activist some \$9,000 for his help.

The problem? First, she said Quanell X became very hard to reach, and wouldn't return phone calls and e-mails. Then, Pete said she received little documentation such as investigative reports, invoices or statements, verifying work was, in fact, being done on her son's case.

For example, Pete said Quanell X charged her \$850 for a trial transcript she said she's never received to this day.

"Where's the transcript?" Pete said.

The I-Team has found no evidence that Quanell X or his private investigators ever requested a copy. Records from the Texas First Court of Appeals show that the only transcript ordered went to the Innocence Project. It's an outside legal team that investigates convictions and has no affiliation with the activist or Sanders' appellate attorney. The court reporter who actually created the transcript also confirmed no other copies were requested.

Finally, court records also show the transcript provided to the Innocence Project cost \$81.50-- ten times less than the \$850 Pete said Quanell X charged.

It is now four years after she first started paying, and Pete said she has no idea if her money ever helped her son or where it went.

"What am I getting out of this? What is the money for?" Pete said. "It has to be brought out that he's hurting lots of people."

In fact, the I-Team has spoken with a half-dozen other people who claim they too either paid Quanell X and got little in return, or when they couldn't pay, Quanell X turned them away.

The I-Team spoke with several African-American community activists from across the nation, and covering the range of the political spectrum. They all shared the viewpoint of Lecia Brooks.

"I don't call him an activist," Brooks said. "I call him an entrepreneur."

Brooks, 56, has a long record as a well-regarded community activist and as a historian of activism. Growing up in Oakland, California, she said she remembers how activists, such as the original Black Panthers, created free clinics and services for her neighborhood and others. Brooks herself began working at the National Conference for Community and Justice, helping the disadvantaged and teaching tolerance seminars. She now runs the Civil Rights Memorial at the Southern Poverty Law Center, an organization that has fought hate and racism for decades.

Why does she call Quanell X an entrepreneur? Brooks said an activist generally does not fund a cause from the very people who need his help, but rather from donors and grants. Otherwise, Brooks said, making someone pay a significant fee for a service is simply a business transaction and not activism.

"You're a community leader during the press conference and you're an entrepreneur when someone comes to you for help" she said. "It's very unfortunate."

So we had some questions for Quanell X.

I-Team: "Several of the people we've spoken with say you appeared to be more about the money, rather than their plight."

Quanell X: "No, that's not the case."

I-Team: "How many people have you turned down because they can't pay?"

Quanell X: "To be honest with you, I'm not sure."

I-Team: "Dozens?"

Quanell X: "I'm not sure about that."

I-Team: "Certainly you have done so."

Quanell X: "We have turned some away, yes."

I-Team: "They can't pay, you won't play?"

Quanell X: "No, there's no such thing as 'you can't pay, we won't play' because we've been playing for so long without any financial interest given to us in many cases."

In fact, Quanell X drafted five pages of cases he said he handled for no compensation. They include helping individuals, or aiding in a communal injustice. Additionally, at a restaurant in the Third Ward of Houston, Minister Robert Muhammad gathered a group of people who said Quanell X provided something vital to them without charging a dime.

"He was very supportive, very helpful," said Charlamane Leonard.

Her family's case made headlines when their six children were discovered living in a storage shed. That brought state authorities who took their children into protective custody. But the father, Prince Leonard, said their story had a happy ending when the activist intervened.

“With the help of Brother Quanell, he got our family back together in less than two months,” Leonard said.

Or take the case of senior citizen Jesse Durden. She said her home badly needed repairs, and Quanell X convinced a contractor to step in.

“Put a roof on my house, didn’t cost me a dime,” Durden said.

In addition, other local leaders point to Quanell X negotiating the peaceful surrender of accused criminals over the years.

“We simply want to make sure that the whole story is told,” Nation of Islam Minister Robert Muhammad said.

“There are good things that Quanell X has done,” Muhammad said.

In fact, Muhammad and other well-known community leaders, such as the Reverend William Lawson, Reverend Ronald Smith and Howard Jefferson of the NAACP sent a letter to KHOU saying that Quanell X has done considerable good for no pay and that this be included in our report. They also stated that the fees he charges are justified.

And when we spoke with the activist, Quanell X maintained he’s not in it for the money.

“If it was up to us, we would never charge,” he said. “(But) we incur serious expenses.”

For example, there is the case of Hilda Pete’s son, the murder conviction of Joe Nathan Sanders.

“I had two separate investigators working on that case,” Quanell X said.

I-Team: “Are you willing to provide us documentation of the investigatory work?”

Quanell X: “Yes I will, absolutely.”

Indeed, a few days later he provided paperwork including a \$630 invoice from private investigator Josiah English III.

The only problem?

“I did it pro-bono, free of charge,” English said.

English said he didn’t want any money because he believed in the claims of innocence by the convicted murderer Sanders. English also said he definitely let Quanell X know that there would be no bill for his work, most of which was done in January.

Then last month, about the time we asked Quanell X for an interview, English said the activist called and insisted he was going to get paid after all. He said the activist requested an invoice and English complied. It was that invoice Quanell X provided the I-Team as proof of his expenses. He has since received at least partial payment.

So the I-Team asked if English thought Quanell X had been trying to make money from the detective’s initially free services.

“You know I can’t control that,” said English, “all I know is I uphold my integrity as an investigator.”

The I-Team also spoke with Nationwide Investigations, the other company Quanell X claimed he assigned to Pete’s case. The company verified it had done work and billed Quanell X \$1,500 back in 2009, but said it had never been paid until a few weeks ago. It was then, the company claims, that the activist called asking for another copy of the original invoice, and that they have now been paid in full.

So what did Quanell X have to say about all of this? He maintained it was the private investigators who were tardy on billing him. Quanell X also claimed from the beginning, he had always told Josiah English he was going to be paid, despite the investigator’s pro-bono offer.

Recently, Hilda Pete said she got some satisfaction—Quanell X sent her back \$2,000 of the total \$9,000 she claimed she paid. Pete said it happened only after she threatened to go to the media, but Quanell X said he was unable to issue the refund until he had the investigator’s bills. When he did, the activist told us, then he was able to determine how much money was left and refund it. He also disputed the figure of \$9,000, claiming Pete actually paid less.

And what about Sandra Laday and the police custody death of her son Kevin Laday?

I-Team: “She says you did a rally, you got paid, and you disappeared.”

Quanell X: “That’s not the truth. That was a dangerous, dangerous protest. We had to take extra security precautions to cover ourselves.”

I-Team: “And therefore the fee was justified?”

Quanell X: “The fee was absolutely justified.”

But Laday strongly disagrees.

“When we do something, we don’t charge people for it,” Laday said.

There is irony with her situation. Sandra Laday is a nationally-recognized activist herself, running the community aid group “People Supporting People.” It feeds and clothes the needy, and Laday said she gets funds, not from her clients, but by staying up late writing for donations.

The national media called her “Mother Mercy” and “The Angel of Port Arthur” for being a “one-woman charity machine.”

“You give your time, your thoughts and your help,” Laday said. “There shouldn’t be a charge, you’re supposed to do it from your heart.”

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