

Source: Nation of Islam helps troubled Jackson

LOS ANGELES (AP) - Members of the Nation of Islam have begun playing a role in Michael Jackson's affairs, The Associated Press has learned, although the controversial group denies having any official part in the pop star's life.

Sources close to the Jackson camp, speaking on condition of anonymity, told the AP that Nation of Islam members have handled security at the singer's Neverland ranch and have begun taking over some of his business affairs since he was accused of committing lewd acts on a child.

The sources have been involved in Jackson's business affairs for at least a year, and each independently provided the details concerning the Nation of Islam links to the singer.

The group, which issued a statement Monday after receiving inquiries from the AP and other news organizations.

"The Nation of Islam, in response to several inquiries, has said today that it has no official business or professional relationship with Mr. Michael Jackson," the statement said.

"The Nation of Islam joins thousands of other people in wishing him well."

Jackson's attorney, Mark Geragos, also dismissed the reports and denied that Nation of Islam members had been working out of Geragos' office.

"They are not part of his defense," Geragos said. "I'm certainly not pushing away support from anyone, but I

don't ask people what their religious affiliation is when they offer support."

Geragos acknowledged that when he held a news conference on Jackson's behalf after charges were announced on Dec. 18, one of those standing behind him was Leonard F. Muhammad, identified on the Nation of Islam's Web site as its chief of staff.

"Leonard Muhammad was there," Geragos said. "He's one of Michael's supporters."

Under the leadership of Louis Farrakhan, the Nation of Islam advocates Black self-empowerment and a separate African-American state; Jackson is not a Muslim nor a member of the Nation of Islam, according to one of his brothers.

Asked about the Nation of Islam's reported role in directing Jackson's affairs, Jackson business adviser Charles Koppelman said, "It's not the case as to his music, finances and assets. I think it's primarily in security."

Koppelman, a former chief of EMI Records, and another adviser, Alan Whitman, said they remain in charge of Jackson's music and finances.

"I receive his bills and write his checks," said Whitman, an accountant. "Anything else I relate to Mr. Jackson is confidential."

Koppelman, who like Whitman has been a Jackson adviser for the past year, said he has not talked to Jackson

about the Nation of Islam. "If he gets involved on a spiritual basis, that's his business," he said.

Jackson's brother Jermaine has converted to Islam but is not a member of the Nation of Islam. Asked during an appearance on CNN's "Larry King Live" whether his brother planned to convert, Jermaine Jackson said he did not.

Separately, Jackson spokesman Stuart Backerman announced his resignation Monday, citing "strategic differences." Backerman refused to comment on reports involving the Nation of Islam.

Geragos said Backerman was fired last week because he spoke to the news media during a Jackson family get-together Dec. 20 at Jackson's Neverland estate near Santa Barbara.

The event was designed to show support for the embattled singer after he was charged with seven counts of performing lewd or lascivious acts on a child under 14 and two counts of administering an intoxicating agent, reportedly wine.

"He was terminated by me personally for talking when I told him not to," Geragos said.

Backerman responded to Geragos' statement by saying, "That's untrue."

"I was the spokesman up until I just resigned. I was actively involved with management," Backerman said. While Backerman did not immediately explain the reasons for his departure, he said he left reluctantly.



SNOW IN SUMMER-LIN

Photo special to Sentinel-Voice

Apparently Summerlin residents were dreaming of a white after-Christmas. Much of the tiny suburb on the city's western edge was coated with inches of the white stuff on Tuesday morning. Dozens of children could be seen building snowmen, pelting each other with snowballs and sliding down snow-coated fields at Desert Breeze park.

Muslim football tourney gets heat for team names

IRVINE, Calif. (AP) - The idea was innocent enough: A group of young men organize a holiday football tournament and give their teams such innocuous names as "4th and Goal" and "1988'ers." It was some of the other team names that raised eyebrows: Intifada, Soldiers of Allah and Mujahideen.

The furor that followed has forced some teams to change their names and a handful of players to quit. It also sparked a debate that threatens to overshadow the tournament, which was planned primarily for young Muslims and scheduled for Jan. 4.

"This was really just supposed to be about the youth playing football. Now it's become so political that a part of me thinks we shouldn't even play," said Tarek Shawky, 29, one of the tournament's organizers.

Those involved in the league said they never set out to upset or offend anyone. But critics say such names as Intifada and Mujahideen glorify terrorism.

Intifada, "uprising" in Arabic, is a term used by Palestinians for their revolts against Israeli occupation from 1987 to 1993 and over the past three years. Mujahideen, which means "holy warrior," is associated with several Islamic groups that are on the U.S. list of

terrorist organizations.

"The issue is these are words that are linked to real terrorists, real threats, real murders today," said Rabbi Abraham Cooper, associate dean of the Simon Wiesenthal Center.

"There shouldn't be young Americans chanting the name Mujahideen as American soldiers in Afghanistan and Iraq are put in danger and attacked daily," Cooper said. "As for Intifada, it has been a disaster for the Palestinians and the nearly 1,000 Israeli children and parents murdered by suicide bombers."

Muslim leaders have asked the teams to reconsider the names.

"Sensitizing our youths is our role as adults," said Hussam Ayloush, the executive director of the Council on American-Islamic Relations in Southern California.

But he also said he believed the players were not being malicious when they decided the names.

"In this case, the choices were totally innocent and meant for a small intra-Muslim tournament whose members all knew what the terms stand for," Ayloush said. "Unfortun-

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Jackson

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"Before I would hurt a child, I would slit my wrists," Jackson said.

The pop star also said authorities sought to belittle him when he was taken into custody.

"They were supposed to go in, and just check fingerprints, and do the whole thing that they do when they take somebody in," he said. "They manhandled me very roughly. My shoulder is dislocated, literally."

The pain from being handcuffed behind his back "keeps me from sleeping at night," he said.

Jackson said he was locked in a restroom for 45 minutes after he asked to use the facilities. He said the room was smelly because of feces thrown all over.

His bedroom at his Neverland ranch was left a "total wreck" by investigators acting on a search warrant, Jackson said, although he admitted he has yet to see it.

Bradley pressed Jackson, a father of three, on whether he would allow his own children to sleep in a bed with a 45-year-old man and if he understood the way this appeared to others.

"People think sex," Jackson said. "They're thinking sex. My mind doesn't run that way. When I see children, I see the face of God. That's why I love them so much."

Tate lawyer favors plea in wrestling death

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. (AP) - The attorney for a teenager whose life sentence for murdering a 6-year-old family friend was overturned said Monday "you would have to be a fool" to pass up the plea bargain the boy is again being offered.

Richard Rosenbaum, Lionel Tate's appellate attorney, said on NBC's "Today" show that he couldn't say if his 16-year-old client would accept the plea offer, but he said Tate "is willing to take responsibility for being involved in this incident."

The plea bargain offered Friday would let Tate plead guilty to second-degree murder and receive a sentence of

three years in prison, of which he has already served 33 months. He would serve three more months in prison, followed by a year of house arrest and 10 years probation.

Tate was convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to life in prison without parole, but a state appellate court threw out the conviction and sentence earlier this month, saying his mental competency should have been tested before trial.

The State Attorney General's Office said it would file an appeal of that ruling Monday, the deadline for such an appeal. Prosecutors could ultimately refile charges. Meanwhile, Tate

remains in jail.

Former prosecutor Ken Padowitz, who tried Tate and now represents Tiffany's mother, Dewese Eunick-Paul, said the woman always believed that a life sentence was too harsh. She wants "justice for her daughter," and is "giving her blessing" to the plea offer, Padowitz said.

Tate "is getting two bites of the apple," Padowitz told "Today," adding that Tiffany didn't get that chance.

Rosenbaum insisted Monday that Tiffany's death was an accident, although he has previously dismissed claims at Tate's trial that the boy accidentally killed the girl while imitating professional

wrestling moves he had seen on television.

In March, Tate changed his story and said he accidentally killed Tiffany when he jumped on top of her as she lay at the bottom of a staircase while his mother was baby sitting the girl at her Pembroke Park apartment. Tate weighed 160 pounds; Tiffany weighed about 50.

Experts testified at Tate's trial that Tiffany died of a fractured skull and lacerated liver, injuries consistent with a beating. Rosenbaum said Monday that Tate "wants to be a productive member of society." He said the boy wants to be a waiter and eventually own a restaurant.