

Linda Jumah sentenced to probation, home confinement for tax evasion

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Newark, NJ—The co-owner of political fundraising and consulting company Elite Strategies LLC, who organized Newark Mayor Ras Baraka's "Mayor's Ball," will not be serving any jail time for under-reporting income that she received in 2015 after filing a false federal personal income tax return.

Linda Jumah, 35, of Newark, was sentenced Wednesday in federal court to three years of probation, eight months of which will be spent in home confinement.

Jumah will now have to wear a location monitoring device and will be restricted to her home, with the exception of travel for work, church and medical care.

Jumah was also ordered to pay \$19,633 in restitution to the IRS, along with a \$20,000 penalty, both of which can be paid in monthly installments.

Chief U.S. District Judge Jose Linares noted the need to impose a deterrent and warned Jumah that a violation of the terms of her sentence could result in jail time.

To date, Jumah has paid back \$20,000 to the IRS.

Linares told Jumah that the court was cognizant of the fact that the government has noted "that there was no excuse for her crimes," also citing Jumah's prior brushes with the law and calling her past "sketchy."

"Defendant shows a level of disrespect for the law and specifically for authority," Linares said of Jumah.

Jumah, who pleaded guilty to tax evasion in November, admitted that after sharing proceeds with business partner and Elite Strategies CEO Kiburi Tucker, she under-reported \$121,941 in income for the 2015 tax year, resulting in a tax loss of \$39,633.

The tax evasion charge potentially carried a maximum penalty of five years in prison and a \$250,000 fine.

Jumah's defense attorney Robert Stahl asked the court to show leniency based on Jumah's past work in the city, noting her "dedication and devotion" to help support underprivileged women in Newark.

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"She has been honest and forthright," Stahl said. "She has remorse and has genuine acceptance of responsibility."

Stahl also noted that former New Jersey Governor Jim McGreevey, who was present in the courtroom and warmly hugged Jumah, had offered to allow her to work in his prisoner reentry program.

In 2013, McGreevey was appointed executive director of Jersey City's Employment and Training Program (JCETP), which provides re-entry coaching for those released from prison.

"Ms. Jumah is a woman of great promise and compassion," Stahl said. "She has come up from a difficult situation," he said, noting that Jumah's family was "not wealthy" and had once lived in a rent-controlled apartment. "She has done so much for so many for so long and we're asking Your Honor to help Linda in this matter. Incarcerating her would make it that much more difficult for her to pay back the money."

Stahl also said the publicity has taken its toll on Jumah.

"The newspaper articles...have been stressful...these articles that you would not normally see in a tax case," he said, noting that the publicity was due to Jumah's "political relationships."

Stahl did not specify the relationships, but in December, Jumah posted a picture of herself with Baraka on Facebook, which showed the two looking cozy in matching pajamas.

But prosecutors asked the judge to note Jumah's "troubling conduct" in the past, the hundreds of thousands of dollars she earned through her consulting business and her history and character.

According to prosecutors, Jumah was the subject of an employee disciplinary report when she worked as a state child care quality insurance inspector.

Records from 2016 show that Jumah was employed by the state, earning an annual salary of \$51,748.

Stahl said Jumah is looking for employment and is currently working part-time earning \$500 every two weeks.

In November, Jumah was suspended without pay from her \$75,000-a-year job as principal community organization specialist in Jersey City, serving as a contact for the city's Earned Sick Leave Law, one of Mayor Steve Fulop's early initiatives.

Fulop supported Baraka in the 2014 mayoral election and Baraka, in turn, supported Fulop's gubernatorial run, which was aborted last year before it could be officially launched.

Jumah addressed the court, stating her “sincere regret” for her actions.

“I have disappointed my family, friends and colleagues,” she said, noting that she now attends church several times a week. “I’m a very private person and I’ve had to go through this trying time very publicly. I know my life will never again be the same.”

Elite Strategies organized the 2016 "Mayor's Ball," an annual \$1,000-a-seat gala fundraiser, has sent out an email blast for Team Baraka and has issued statements on behalf of the mayor.

In 2011, Jumah launched Luxe Newark, a women’s clothing boutique located on Halsey St., alluding in a newspaper interview the possibility of opening a second location in her parents’ native country of Ghana. The store closed permanently just a few years later.

Jumah, who served as a district leader in Newark’s South Ward beginning in 2008, publicly supported then-Councilman Ras Baraka when she put out a 300-word email blast in 2014.

Jumah was nominated by Baraka in 2014 to the Alcohol Beverage Control Board but was replaced just two years later.

Last year, City Hall issued a press release announcing that the Newark Department of Recreation would be joining “entrepreneur Linda Jumah” in hosting the inaugural “Afro Beat Fest” in Military Park in downtown Newark.

City Spokesperson Frank Baraff did not respond immediately to a request for comment on Jumah's sentence.

The festival was a revival of the Africa Newark Street Festival, started in 1988 by Jumah’s father and festival co-founder, Maxwell Kofi Jumah.

Tucker, a longtime friend of Baraka Tucker and the son of Assemblywoman Cleopatra Tucker and the late former Assemblyman and Newark City Councilman Donald Tucker, pleaded guilty in November to charges of tax evasion and wire fraud.

Tucker, 43, admitted that he engaged in numerous acts of wire fraud when he served as the executive director of The Centre Inc., a nonprofit child care center located in Newark's South Ward.

Tucker admitted that he used the ATM card assigned to The Centre for what was described in court as taking out "a steady stream of funds" falsely for the benefit of the child care center. Instead, Tucker used the card to pay for personal expenses. These expenses included more than \$165,000 for costs generated from travel to several states, including Hawaii and Nevada, as well as gambling expenses.

Tucker also used more than \$95,000 of the child care center's funds for personal expenses, including costs generated by personal travel, home furnishings, art and gambling, a including personal cash advances at a casino in Atlantic City.

In total, Tucker defrauded The Centre of more than \$332,000 from 2012 through 2015, according to court documents.

Tucker also admitted that while an employee of the Passaic Valley Sewerage Commission (PVSC), a job that paid him more than \$90,000 per year, he underreported income generated as part of his partnership in Elite Strategies, including funds that he split with Jumah.

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