

The ultimate con artist

Fred Brito worked as a doctor, pastor, and a Red Cross fundraiser. But his resume was most remarkable for what wasn't on it— an ounce of truth



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NBC News

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TRANSCRIPT

Say hello to Fred Brito, a smiling cherubic liar.

One day he was known as Father Fred, while on another, he was a high-profile fundraiser, getting chummy with Hollywood stars. And there's another legal document saying that on the same day, he was really a court-appointed psychiatrist.

They're all Fred Brito. And they're all assumed identities, products of the fertile imagination of a confidence man.

And that's exactly what Fred did or still does; no one's quite sure. What is certain is that along the way, Fred has made his share of friends—and more than a few enemies.

Tonight, we'll take you on the hunt for the real Fred Brito—inside the mind and the world of someone who's not just a con man but a world-class imposter. He tricked state senators, the Red Cross, the courts, celebrities, a prestigious medical school, and the Catholic Church. Tonight, he'll even try to trick you. And you'll meet some of his victims, who only learned they'd been conned... when WE told them.

If you're watching and you recognize Fred Brito, you might be in for a surprise. If that happens, give us a call.

In fact, we were in for a surprise, as we did our best to untangle a huge web of lies.

The beginning

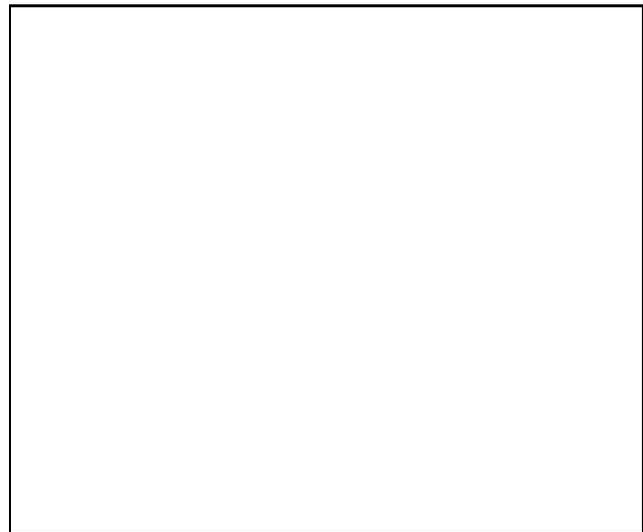
Born Frederick Brito, Fred grew up with five brothers and a sister in a small house in Los Angeles. It turned out that Fred as a child was a lot like Fred the adult. His brother and stepfather:

That longing for the fast life drew a 20-year-old Fred to the Hollywood night club scene in the mid 70's. That's where Fred says he met and began a close friendship with Paul Lynde, best known for his TV roles on "Bewitched" and "The Hollywood Squares."

But the fast life ended as suddenly as it began.

With no money, no fast cars, and no place to

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live, Fred moved back home with his parents.

That's only partially true: that was his first federal crime. Fred had already been convicted of forgery and arrested and charged with theft—that charge was later dismissed. After he took the thousand dollars, the FBI arrested him for embezzlement of bank funds and Fred spent time behind bars. He was later ordered to stay in a half-way house. But before completing the program, Fred decided to skip town, violating his parole.

And when Fred says anything, he means just that. Over the next few years, Fred found himself in and out of prison for renting luxury cars, driving them around town as if they were his own and never returning them back to the place where he rented them.

Still in his 20s, Fred was already a five-time convicted felon.

In fact, Fred spent so much time in the hands of the legal system that he ended up learning some lessons that made his life as a criminal a lot easier.

'Dr. Mark Esparza'

And this is where Fred starts — from smalltime crook to big-time impersonator. He uses the name Dr. F. Mark Esparza and his new job, psychiatrist.

One day, while waiting for his own case to be heard, Fred heard a court-appointed psychiatrist persuade a judge to release a defendant into the psychiatrist's custody.

And Fred says the judge released his friend.

But after serving another sentence for grand theft auto, Fred vowed to turn over a new leaf—to stop living a life of crime and get a job

like everyone else.

That decision gave birth to a lot of people—all of whom were part of one giant lie. Fred landed prestigious jobs, and in some cases received high accolades for his good work, all under different names.

The story of 'Mark Gomez'

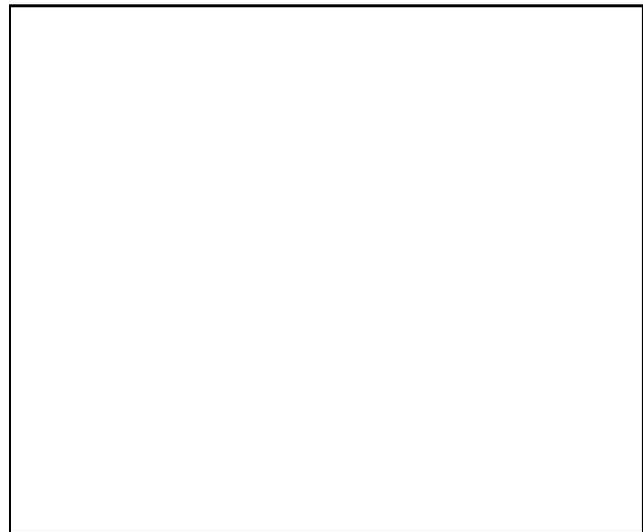
And that's part of what makes the story of Fred Brito so difficult to tell. Because he tried to hide by doing good work. And in the process, he lied to nearly everyone.

As this man was about to find out on camera.

The year was 1985 and Fred Brito was a 32-year-old man who had spent most of his 20s behind bars. So Fred tried to make a fresh start, moving with his parents to Lancaster, California. To his family and to himself, Fred promised to clean up his act.

That was easier said than done. Soon, unbeknownst to his family, Fred did begin a whole new life with a whole new name: Marc Esparza, a made-up man with no criminal record and now with a job in local

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government. Could the imposter succeed as a small-town official?

As Marc Esparza, Fred began to speak out at city council meetings and his constant presence caught the attention of Lancaster's Mayor.

The only problem was that Fred, a.k. a Marc Esparza was still on parole, but he never revealed that to the mayor who was Fred's new champion.

And blow up it did, all because of Fred's moth-like attraction to the spotlight and his inability to stop telling lies.

Fred's latest lie was laid bare, and soon he left Lancaster a seemingly shamed man. Later, Fred landed in Albuquerque, New Mexico where he created another imaginary identity. The new role would put him not just in the local spotlight, but would make him a hero statewide. And this one might have lasted forever if WE hadn't shown up, 10 years later, to reveal the truth.

Fred's new name was Mark Gomez. His job? Advocate for the poor.

In 1998, Ken Sanchez was the Vice Chair for the Bernalillo County Board of Commissioners in Albuquerque, New Mexico when he first heard about Mark Gomez.

That's because the man named Mark Gomez was a product, once again of Fred's inventively dishonest urges. But the glowing calls and letters that came into the commission about Gomez were apparently both genuine and numerous... and Sanchez said, the commission felt it was time to recognize Gomez for all his inspiring, giving work.

In April 1998, Sanchez and the other commissioners celebrated Mark Gomez's good work by awarding him a County Proclamation. Not only that, Gomez received commendations from the New Mexico House of Representatives and the State Senate.

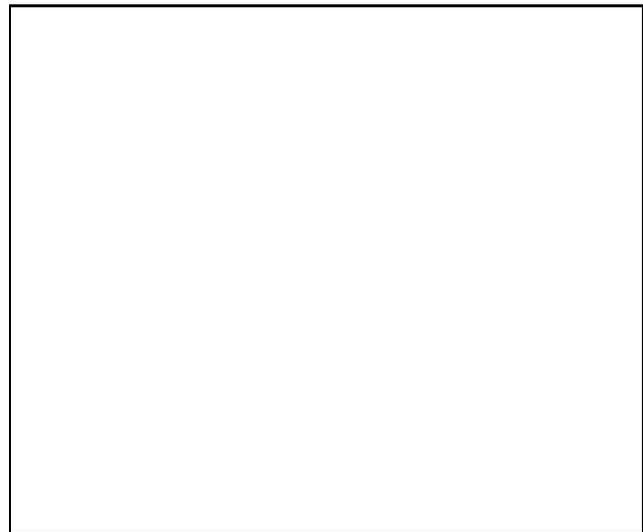
He conned a lot of people because Fred is both cunning and charming and not afraid to take a chance. All of that will buy a con man a lot of good will. Fred left New Mexico and continued to lie his way to a new job. Most of the time, no one bothered to check his references. And if they did, Fred had it covered.

And who'd be saying that? A new persona Fred had created—named Harrison Winslow. His occupation: Fred's loyal, but completely imaginary reference.

The name Harrison Winslow was taken from the movie "Heart and Souls." In the film, Harrison Winslow is a guardian angel. In real life, he did the same for Fred Brito.

This would be a great story if it ended right here. But of course, it doesn't. At this point, Fred was on a personal high; he'd gotten away with creating and playing several different

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roles. He'd also figured out how to get the kind of work he wanted, the kind of work that's not usually available when you have a prison record. Now, Fred decided it was time to take all of this a step further—to start impersonating more, sophisticated, important people.

A few years back, Fred applied for and was accepted into a religious training program at a Catholic Seminary outside of Albuquerque, New Mexico. He used that knowledge not to become a priest but to impersonate one so he could escape some new embezzlement charges back in California. Wearing a collar, Fred headed to Yuma, Arizona.

The imposter would attempt weddings, confessions, baptisms, and Sunday mass.

An immaculate deception

The year was 2002, and Fred Brito had adopted a new personality: his name Father Federico B. Gomez de Esparza, a Catholic Priest.

The monsignor didn't stand a chance. The imposter had him at "hello."

Monsignor Richard O'Keefe has been in the priesthood for 48 years. Over those years, he's heard it all, some of the worst and most hurtful things people can do to each other. Maybe that's why the man O'Keefe knew as Father Fred seemed such a breath of fresh air.

Father Fred came highly recommended, or so it seemed. He carried a letter of introduction from a small church in Mexico and just the right papers to accompany that. Fred was proud of those documents because he created all of them just a few days earlier, on his laptop.

Fred was assigned to Immaculate Conception Parish in Yuma, in part because he speaks Spanish and there was a real shortage of priests who could do that.

While posing as a priest, Fred presided over Sunday masses, baptisms, confessions and weddings. He did well. Just ask Maria and Gene Doten.

Father Fred's homily: "The big day arrived and the test of how strong this marriage is begins the moment they leave this church."

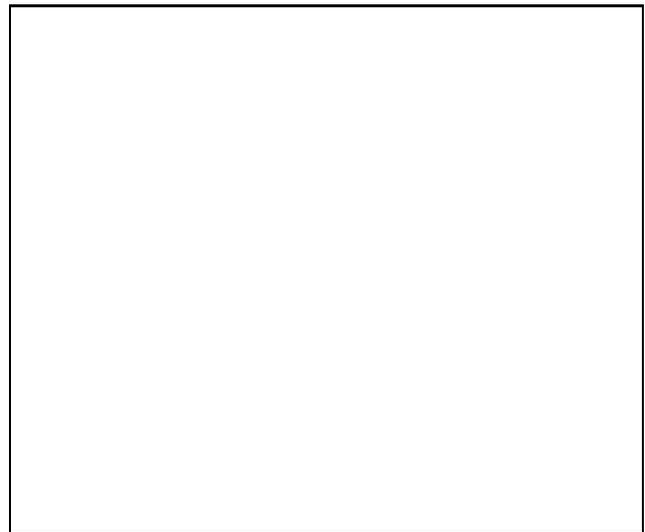
Maria and Gene met Father Fred just a few weeks before they were to be married. The priest who was originally was supposed to marry them became ill, so Father Fred stepped in.

"...and for Gene and Maria don't lose sight of him because with God all things are possible."

The Dotens say they never suspected Father Fred wasn't a real priest even though some things about him struck them as a little odd—like the time Maria went to confession.

And then there was the wedding ceremony.

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In Catholic ceremonies, the priest is normally waiting at the altar, but in the excitement of the day, the Doten's didn't notice it until they saw their wedding video. Looking back at it now, they wish that had been the only thing wrong with Father Fred.

The year was 2002 and Fred Brito was on the lam, posing as Father Fred, a Catholic priest in Yuma, Arizona. He fooled the local minister. He fooled Gene and Maria Doten, the couple he married and sent off on a honeymoon. But it turned out Fred couldn't fool U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

When traveling back from a trip to Mexico, Fred was stopped at the border and a computer check revealed Father Fred had a warrant out for his arrest in California. With the help of another priest who innocently vouched for him, Fred talked his way through the border checkpoint—but he knew he'd soon be found out. So in the middle of the night, Fred left Yuma and headed up the highway to Phoenix, where he prepared to once again pass himself off as a man of the cloth.

In Phoenix, Fred performed all priestly duties. Until one day, without warning, U.S Marshalls arrested him on those embezzlement charges in California. Fred was sentenced to 16 months in state prison. He had some time to think about the people he had fooled while he was a priest.

Some people are already paying that penalty. Gene and Maria Doten returned from their honeymoon to the shocking news that Father Fred, the wonderful priest who married them, was in fact not a priest at all.

Devastating because the Dotens are strict Catholics. And that since Father Fred was

really ex-con Fred, the Eucharist or the body and blood of Christ was therefore missing from their marriage ceremony.

Fred married other couples too—but we couldn't find them. So if you're watching tonight...and this is the face of the priest who married you, give us a call. You also might want to check with your church to make sure your marriage is valid.

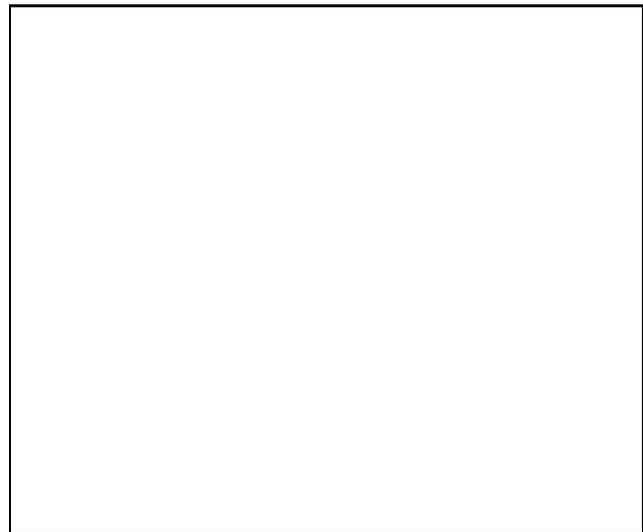
That news was very hard for the Dotens to hear. But at the time, Fred was not filled with remorse about the Dotens or anyone else. Instead, he was full of optimism that he would be able to continue to lie his way into job after job.

'Frederikoe DiBritto' at UCLA, Red Cross

And so it was time for a new persona—the riskiest yet. The name: Frederikoe DiBritto the Third. The title was Director of Development for the Division of Digestive Diseases at UCLA. He would raise money for one of the most prestigious medical institutions in the world.

Fred had gained entre' to that world with an imposter's tools: brains, charm, and the gift of gab.

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He'd never gone to business school, but he laid out a step by step plan. And convinced his audience he had the right numbers. Fred began earning a six figure salary and working for a doctor named Gary Gitnick.

True? Or another Fred Brito fantasy? UCLA will neither confirm or deny that Fred did in fact rub elbows with the stars.

UCLA did confirm that they fired Fred after learning he was an ex-con. Fred was never accused of any crime while he was there. Remember, it may be dishonest and stupid, but it is not illegal to lie on your resume.

And that's Fred's argument in a nutshell— that he only lied to get work because ex-cons can't get work. And Fred claims that while he may not always have been on the side of the angels, he never hurt anyone.

Dereck Andrade met Fred Brito in August 2005. Andrade was part of a panel evaluating Fred in his final interview for a position with the Red Cross in Pasadena, California.

But at the same time, Andrade thought Fred was just too good to be true and that worried him.

And the Red Cross hired him even though Andrade says he recommended against it. And within weeks, Fred Brito had a new line on his long, dishonest resume. The name: Frederiq Brito-Gomez. The title? Chief Financial Development Officer.

It was late August of 2005. Fred was just getting settled in his new job when Hurricane Katrina hit.

Suddenly, Fred had two challenges. He had to keep his real identity hidden—but at the same

time, he had to deliver as a fund-raiser or risk being exposed as a fraud. Had he finally gone too far?

Fred Gomez, a.k.a Fred Brito, was a conman walking a tightrope, trying to hide his past in plain sight as a fundraiser for the Red Cross in the days just after hurricane Katrina.

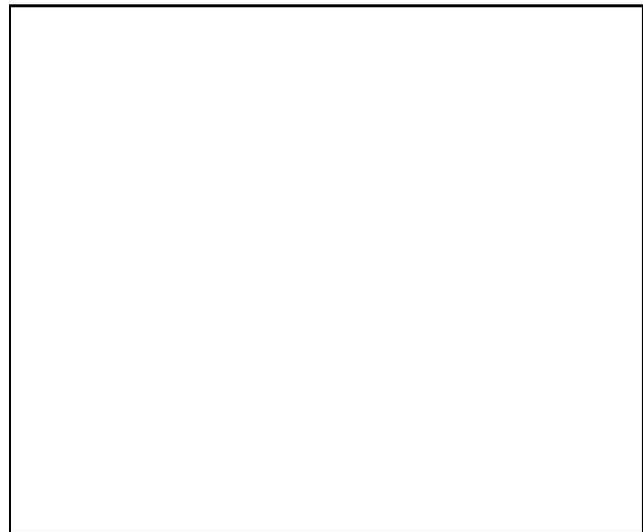
Fluent in Spanish, Fred appeared on NBC's Spanish-language network Telemundo to talk about the Katrina relief efforts.

Fred also participated in the production of this public-service announcement, featuring actor Rob Schneider. In a behind-the-scenes video, you can see Fred at work—giving Schneider a tour of the Red Cross facility. Fred was playing his part perfectly.

In the same piece of tape, you can see Dereck Andrade, at the time the Director of Public Affairs for the Pasadena Red Cross. And right about this time is when Andrade began to see through Fred's shiny resume.

But, if you ask Fred, he'll tell you he not only did that job, he aced it.

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Once again, there are no charges that Fred stole or embezzled any money while at the Red Cross, just that in his job, he was flying blind.

Andrade contends that he also knew what Fred did and because of that decided to look into Fred's background a little more carefully.

It was a front page spread on the life of Fred Brito, the con man, published just 10 days after Fred began his new job with the Red Cross.

It's a newspaper widely read in Pasadena, an LA suburb. Could Fred's bosses have somehow missed it? We tried to contact Fred's supervisor at the time, but she no longer works at the Red Cross and actually more than half of the staff that worked with Brito isn't there either.

In the wake of that discovery, Fred was dismissed, but so was Dereck Andrade for allegedly leaking word of Fred's scam at the Red Cross to the media. At the time, Andrade's boss told her staff not to talk about Fred to reporters. Andrade denies he was the leak.

So how much can a lie hurt? Ask Maria and Gene Doten, whose marriage started with one huge lie. Or ask Dereck Andrade, who wishes he'd never met Fred Brito.

But Fred now says he's once again ready to change. Is that true? He was about to try to con us.

It's been a long trail for the man who began life as Fred Brito and who along the way has been known as a court-appointed psychiatrist, a much-admired community organizer, a trusted priest, and a high-profile fundraiser.

Fred wants you to remember that while he doesn't deny having committed numerous crimes, most of his role-playing was just to secure the kind of work that's not usually available to an ex-con. To hear Fred tell it, lying about his background was a matter of honor.

But since 1974, the part Fred has played most often and most convincingly has been a prison inmate. He's had at least 12 convictions, and sentenced to more than 15 years behind bars.

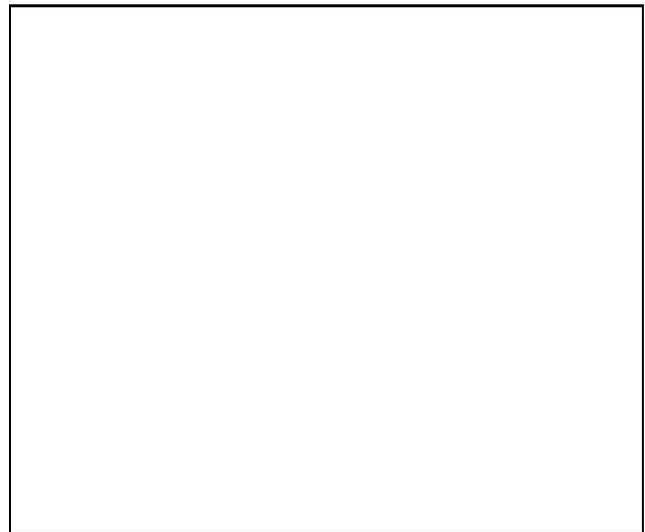
Over the years, he's reinvented himself time and again. Usually, he's successful at first, but Fred Brito's past has what must be to him an annoying habit of coming back to haunt him.

Now Fred says he's ready for his latest and most challenging role: an honest man.

But here's the problem, Fred and the truth are only casual friends.

In part because of that, and in part because we are, after all, dealing with a con man here, we tried to check as much of Fred's story as we could. His rap sheet is full of convictions for forgery, theft, embezzlement, and credit card

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fraud. Is that Fred Brito— a charming, small time thief? Maybe. We also found, all the way back in 1974 an arrest on child-molestation charges. That is the only sex crime on Fred Brito's record. And he says he can explain it.

We checked again and again, but we couldn't find out anything more about that strange episode from Fred's past. Keep in mind that he's been quite upfront about his criminal history... to us, at least. Fred hasn't been as forthcoming to prospective employers. But he says now, he is a changed man.

He now offers himself up as sort of anti-Fred Brito.

It sounds quite encouraging, maybe even truly inspirational. But then we checked some more—and we found this.

A new leaf?

For the record, Fred stopped borrowing John Futrell's inspirational story after we confronted him about it. And he says now, he's committed...to going straight. Again.

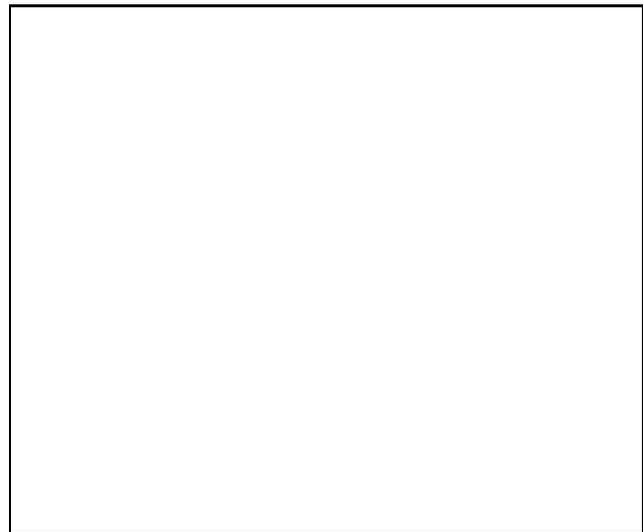
It sounds good. But then, it always did. So we'll end with a warning: If any of these men apply for a job with you, you might want to check them out. And don't bother calling the references.

Fred Brito has since been hired -- and fired -- from another job, this time at a performing arts academy in New Mexico.

He now has a literary agent and is working on a book about his life, with advice on how -not- to get conned.

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