

How First Liberty used faith and media to build trust

Ads, appearances and endorsements on Trump-friendly media helped to bolster the Frost family and its business. Now former allies feel ‘totally betrayed.’



Brant Frost IV is the founder of First Liberty Building & Loan of Newnan.



The Securities and Exchange Commission alleges Frost and First Liberty operated a Ponzi scheme.
FIRST LIBERTY BUILDING & LOAN YOUTUBE ARVIN TEMKAR/AJC



John Fredericks, a conservative radio host, once pitched First Liberty as a way to “help out America First MAGA patriots.” HYOSUB SHIN/AJC



WSB radio host Erick Erickson described the family as “active in conservative politics here in Georgia, a good Christian family.” ARVIN TEMKAR/AJC



S. Gregory Hays, the court-appointed receiver for First Liberty Building & Loan, opens the door to the office in Newnan on July 16. The SEC has sued First Liberty for allegedly defrauding investors of at least \$140 million. ARVIN TEMKAR/AJC

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Before federal regulators accused Brant Frost IV of orchestrating a \$140 million Ponzi scheme, the Newnan businessman and his family built trust in conservative circles by tapping into something deeper than market pitches. He sold ideology.

With endorsements from MAGA influencers and faith-laced appeals on conservative media platforms, Frost and his family cast First Liberty Building & Loan as a way for investors to grow wealth while advancing Christian values and boosting President Donald Trump's

movement.

On-air pitches framed the investments in First Liberty business loans as part of the “patriot economy.” Talk show hosts praised their financial offerings. Some even brought the founder’s son, Brant Frost V, on-air to sell “First Liberty Notes,” a high-dollar investment promised that steep returns for those who ponied up at least \$25,000.

Now, the media ecosystem that once served as a megaphone for First Liberty is distancing itself from the elder Frost and the failed Newnan company as the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission works to recover investor losses after it was shuttered on June 27.

The shift was clear the other day on conservative radio host John Fredericks’ show, when a panel of GOP activists was asked by a caller about Frost, who publicly apologized, and his family.

The segment quickly turned tense. Some guests said the Frosts should be exiled from Georgia GOP politics entirely. Others urged patience while the courts sort things out. Fredericks called the SEC’s allegations “very disturbing” and said his main concern is for the victims.

Fredericks once pitched First Liberty as a way to “help out America First MAGA patriots.” But in an interview this week, he said he now feels “absolutely, totally betrayed” by the family.

He said he thoroughly vetted the products promoted on his show and trusted the Frosts because of their deep GOP ties, leadership roles, years of advertising on bigger conservative platforms and the firm’s presence in Georgia that dated back to 1993.

“This wasn’t a situation where someone came in from out of nowhere,” said Fredericks, who wasn’t an investor in the firm. “Not in our wildest dreams would you think this thing reached the level of deceit that was presented by the SEC.”

‘Beyond upset’

Fredericks wasn’t alone in elevating the Frosts.

The SEC alleged in its complaint earlier this month that starting in 2024, First Liberty ramped up its “solicitation of potential investors” through radio ads, internet podcasts and its online presence.

The now-defunct First Liberty website featured endorsements from pro-Trump figures like Charlie Kirk and praise from national radio host Hugh Hewitt, who, in December, likened Frost IV to “Georgia’s George Bailey.”

First Liberty was also an advertiser on Erick Erickson’s WSB radio show, where Erickson described the family as “active in conservative politics here in Georgia, a good Christian family.”

“I do know the Frost family. I have known them for years. They are good people,” Erickson once said in 2020 while talking about First Liberty as a sponsor of his show. “Be sure to tell them that I sent you, and they will treat you right.”

Erickson declined comment.

Frost IV didn’t return multiple requests for comments. But he previously told The Atlanta Journal-Constitution in a statement that he takes “full responsibility for my actions and am resolved to spend the rest of my life trying to repay as much as I can to the many people I misled and let down.”

Frost V, who frequently represented First Liberty on conservative media, has not been accused of wrongdoing by the SEC. He also did not respond to requests for comment.

Investors are now trying to pick up the pieces and recover whatever they can amid mounting legal pressure on Frost IV.

Richard Hortman said in an interview that First Liberty’s political connections once gave him a sense of comfort. Now he’s trying to claw back the \$275,000 he plowed into the firm. Judy Stanton of Gwinnett County told The Newnan Times-Herald she and her husband invested \$450,000 over a period of time after hearing Erickson personally vouch for the Frosts on the radio.

“We are beyond upset,” she told the Times-Herald.

First Liberty’s collapse is forcing a reckoning within Georgia’s conservative circles. Some Republicans say the family’s appeal to faith and political ideology turned belief into bait. “For over a decade, I’ve witnessed the Frost family preach conservative and Christian values to anyone who would listen,” said Bobby Saporow, a veteran Republican operative. “They used that facade to rob, cheat and steal from families that thought they were good and honest

people.”

‘Totally betrayed’

Experts say the Frosts also benefited from a powerful media apparatus that blurred the lines between ideology and commerce, giving the firm a veneer of credibility.

Anthony Nadler, a media studies professor at Ursinus College in Pennsylvania, said First Liberty is one of many firms that align themselves with the pro-Trump “patriot economy.” In conservative media, he added, many listeners and viewers “feel like there’s a level of trust that they have with hosts and personalities.”

That dynamic can be powerful but also risky.

“Part of the selling point of conservative media is, ‘We’ve got this baked-in high-trust relationship with our audiences,’ ” said A.J. Bauer, a journalism professor at the University of Alabama.

That trust can also attract bad actors. Bauer said some conservative outlets, already marginalized by mainstream advertisers, rely on lower-profile sponsors willing to pay for access to loyal audiences.

“If I’m a company that is running a Ponzi scheme or some other kind of, you know, borderline sketchy kind of business, it behooves me to advertise in a space where people are already trusting the outlet or the space itself,” said Bauer. “It lends me an imprimatur of credibility.”

It’s also unclear what legal liability, if any, media endorsers could face.

An endorser and the company they endorse can both be held liable for deceptive advertising, said Bonnie Patten of Truth in Advertising, a consumer watchdog group.

The Federal Trade Commission requires that if someone is paid to endorse a product, the endorser must be truthful, not misleading, and disclose their relationship with the company, said Mary Engle of BBB National Programs, a nonprofit that reviews the veracity of potentially problematic advertisements.

Federal law adds other guardrails. The Federal Communications Commission prohibits stations from airing fraudulent material and says on its website it expects them to “act with

reasonable care” to ensure that ads are not false or misleading. Securities laws impose stricter standards under an “anti-touting” rule, which requires anyone promoting investments to disclose the nature, source and amount of compensation.

That’s because regulators don’t want investors to think that “someone they respect, a celebrity who maybe has a lot more money, is more sophisticated in this area, is giving an unbiased opinion,” Patten said.

Fredericks, for his part, said he no longer believes the Frosts should hold any role in Georgia Republican politics. But his biggest priority, he said, is making sure those who trusted the family recover their losses.

“There’s an accountability for the host to vet the product you’re promoting. And I did that in great detail. I feel totally betrayed. My listeners feel betrayed. My friends have been betrayed,” he said. “They need to find a way to make their investors whole.”