

# 3rd man held over threat to maim boy

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him as a consultant.

"There certainly was never animosity between him and anybody in our operation," Kaplan said. "He's obviously a desperate individual."

Kaplan said that in the past year, he had advised Alber on possible business projects but declined Alber's requests to invest in the projects.

Kaplan said he had suspected early that Alber might be involved in the extortion plot.

Two clues, he said, were that the extortion letter was written on a computer and that it was packaged distinctively, as if by someone familiar with direct-mail marketing techniques.

Neighbors who watched agents arrest Alber said that during the four years Alber has lived in the neighborhood, he has suffered several financial losses.

Rich Brown, who lives across the street, said Alber once drove a Mercedes-Benz and a Chevrolet Corvette but was forced to sell both cars.

"Now he's driving an old Buick," said Brown, pointing to a blue-and-white convertible with a massive oil leak under it. "He definitely had a champagne appetite."

Marion Minchuk, a Mesa real-estate agent and a longtime friend of Alber, said his friend "had been under a lot of stress. You'd be under a lot of stress, too, if you had two kids and were out of work and couldn't find a job."

Alber's former wife, Mary Ann Alber, who has custody of their 8-year-old daughter and lives in Chandler, said Alber worked at one time with Michael Grant Miller, 24, of the 1600 block of South Mesa Drive, Mesa, who along with Mark Andrew Nelson, 31, of the 6800 block of East Cochise Road, Scottsdale, was arrested last week on suspicion of extortion.

In the course of investigating the extortion plot, FBI agents traced one call made to Kaplan's office to a pay telephone at an ABCO supermarket at 1988 Alma School Road, Chandler. A fingerprint taken from the phone by the Mesa police was matched to Miller.

At the time Miller and Nelson were

arrested, the FBI said that on Feb. 7, Kaplan, who owns Health and Nutrition Laboratories, 4545 E. Shea Boulevard, got a letter that had been written on a computer and post-marked in Phoenix the day before.

The sender demanded that Kaplan pay \$250,000 in one week or his son's arm or leg would be removed," according to an FBI affidavit released last week.

The threat was directed against Kaplan's son Brian, 12. Kaplan also has a daughter, Lauren, 7.

The FBI said Thursday that it thought the two men who were arrested were minor players in the scheme. James Ahearn, special agent in charge of the Phoenix FBI office, said agents still were searching for the person who wrote the letter on a computer.

After a story in Friday's *Arizona Republic*, a person contacted the FBI and said Alber was the letter writer, it was learned Tuesday.

Other information on Alber was not released Tuesday because U.S. Attorney Linda Akers asked a federal-court official to keep sealed an affidavit filed in support of the arrest of Alber.

After getting a phone call from the extortionists Feb. 13, Kaplan went to a Security Pacific Bank branch as directed and found a note that sent him to Saguaro Lake boat ramp No. 2 to get further instructions. Before he arrived, FBI agents monitoring him saw cars owned by Miller and Nelson a quarter of a mile from the ramp.

Nelson and Miller were among four males seen near the cars, and Nelson was holding a mobile telephone, the affidavit released last week says.

Both Mary Ann Alber, the former wife, and Michelle Fritz of Glendale, Alber's girlfriend and the mother of his 7-month-old son, said they were shocked by his arrest.

"I've known him for 10 years, and there is not a mean bone in his body," his former wife said.

She said Alber had tried to find full-time work since he was laid off but with no success.

Fritz called the arrest "preposterous" and said, "He wouldn't do anything like that."

Contributing to this article was Pamela Manson of *The Arizona Republic*.

## 3rd Man cont.

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