
December 27, 2002

After Winning \$315 Million, Man Vows to Spread Wealth

By DAVID M. HALBFINGER

The helicopter he has had his eye on can wait, says the man who won the \$314.9 million Christmas Day Powerball prize, the largest undivided lottery jackpot in history.

"The very first thing I'm going to do is, I'm going to go home, I'm going to sit down and make out three checks to three pastors for 10 percent of this check," said Andrew J. Whittaker Jr., 55, the winner.

Mr. Whittaker, a member of the Church of God, said he had not been to church in at least a month. He said the Lord surely must have had a hand in his fortune nonetheless.

"I don't have luck, I'm blessed," Mr. Whittaker said this afternoon at a news conference, after picking up a check for \$10 million at the state lottery headquarters in Charleston. It was just a down payment toward his lump-sum payout of \$170.5 million, which he has chosen to take instead of 30 yearly payments.

"I just want to thank God for letting me pick the right numbers, or letting the machine pick the right numbers for me," said Mr. Whittaker, who is already a millionaire and the owner of three local businesses. For the record, those numbers, drawn on Wednesday night, were 5-14-16-29-53, and the Powerball was 7.

After taxes, he will clear \$113.4 million once the money transfers among the 25 members of the Multi-State Lottery Association are complete on Jan. 14, officials said. But Mr. Whittaker, who is known as Jack, said he would tithe, as has been his monthly practice for years, according to his gross income.

So he plans that three pastors -- one at a church here in Hurricane, another near his hometown, Jumping Branch, near the Virginia border, and a third now in California -- will receive a total of \$17 million.

"I'm getting really excited because of the good works I can do with this," Mr. Whittaker said. "Seventeen million in the state of West Virginia will really do good for the poor."

He said he would leave the details to the three clergymen, none of whom he had yet told of his intentions. But he said he especially wanted to help "people who want to better themselves to have a better life."

Mr. Whittaker bought his ticket here Monday morning while picking up his regular coffee and biscuit at a gas station around the corner from his office. He owns three construction businesses, including an equipment dealership and his main concern, Diversified Enterprises, a \$17-million-a-year company that builds water and sewer lines and water treatment plants.

Thanks to the subdivisions that are fast carving up the West Virginia hills, the company, which started up 18 months ago, has already outgrown the tiny converted town house here where Mr. Whittaker sits on a folding chair and writes bids for utility companies across the state.

His bookkeeper, Brenda Collins, said Mr. Whittaker was a hands-on manager and had been eyeing a helicopter for a couple of years to hop from job to job without having to make his way along West Virginia's winding roads.

"I'm very excited for him," Ms. Collins said between telephone calls from would-be investment advisers and others with their hands out. "Everyone's begging for money. That's already started."

Mr. Whittaker said he had three priorities: tithing, helping his family and expanding his business. He laid off 25 of his 117 workers before Christmas because of bad weather, he said. He hopes to use some of his winnings to buy up construction projects from contractors who run into financial trouble and put more of his employees to work.

Mr. Whittaker's relatives said he and his wife of 36 years, Jewell, had gone through hard times lately.

"We've had eight deaths in our family in the last eight years," said Carolyn Foster, a niece of Mr. Whittaker's. His only child, Ginger McMahon, 33, has Hodgkin's lymphoma, which is now in remission, Ms. Foster said.

Yet this year's Christmas was "the best in my life," Mr. Whittaker said -- and that was before he learned he had won the jackpot. He said he had decorated the Christmas tree with his only grandchild, Brandi Bragg, 15, and spent the day surrounded by relatives.

Mr. Whittaker, who has been buying \$100 in tickets any time the Powerball jackpot tops \$100 million, said he went to bed on Wednesday night at his home in Scott Depot, about five miles from here, thinking he had matched all but one number.

"The numbers came up wrong on the TV screen," he said.

At 5 this morning, he said, he woke, turned on the television and saw that the winning ticket had been bought from the C & L Super Serve in Hurricane. "Let me see that ticket," he said he told his wife.

At 9, he woke up his granddaughter at her friend's house. "I thought he was mad," Brandi said. "He said he won the lottery. I was like, 'No, you didn't! You swear?'"

Besides the helicopter, Mr. Whittaker, who says he will continue to play the lottery, allowed that he might just buy one of those big houses in a "gated community somewhere."

His daughter, who has worked alongside him for years, said she had been getting ready to go back to work. "But I think I'm retired now," Ms. McMahon said, adding, "I'm going to buy a condo in Cancún, and I'll come back here in hurricane season."

Jewell Whittaker, meanwhile, said she just wanted to make one dream come true: to visit Israel. "It's where Jesus walked," she said, "and I long to go there."

Hurricane, about 20 miles west of Charleston, has just 5,200 residents, and it seems everyone either knows Mr. Whittaker or stands to benefit indirectly from his winnings. At the C & L Super Serve, the owner, Larry Trogdon, received a \$100,000 bonus today for selling the winning ticket. His daughter, Amy, 21, says she will marry next summer and may now honeymoon in Hawaii.

Even the state expects a much-needed windfall, said Gov. Bob Wise. West Virginia will get \$11.1 million in taxes on the jackpot, not to mention its proceeds from the \$3.8 million in lottery tickets sold in the state, Mr. Wise said. All told, that will help close an anticipated gap of \$30 million in the state's \$3 billion budget this year, he said.

State lottery officials said the \$314.9 million jackpot was the biggest Powerball prize yet, and the third-largest lottery jackpot in United States history. The record was \$363 million paid out by the Big Game, a rival multistate lottery, to ticketholders in Illinois and Michigan in May 2000. The second-largest was a \$331 million Big Game jackpot split three ways last April.

For all the wealth being spread around by the lottery, church and state-sponsored gambling still coexist uneasily here in the snow-dusted mountains of Appalachia. Just past Mr. Whittaker's church in a converted skating rink on State Route 34 is another house of worship, the Teays Valley Church of the Nazarene. On its front lawn tonight was a brightly lit sign: "Americans now spend more money on gambling than on groceries."

For a while at least, the pastor there may just have a tough time persuading his flock that there is anything wrong with that.