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Politics & Elections

Fueled by rage over a ‘stolen election,’ a Michigan man breached the U.S. Capitol after Trump’s call to action

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By **Malachi Barrett** | mbarret1@mlive.com

“How much rage do you think you can fit into a bottle?”

Jeramiah Caplinger, a 25-year-old Taylor resident who told MLive he entered the U.S. Capitol during the Jan. 6 riots, posed the question during an interview Thursday, Feb. 11.

“If you see a brown bear in a cave and it’s sleeping and you start poking it with a stick, how long before poking it with that stick is not only going to wake it up but it’s going to be pissed off?” Caplinger said. “Personally I think it will only take a couple of tries before it hits you.”

His voice shaking, Caplinger described how the events of 2020 fueled outrage among former President Donald J. Trump’s supporters. After the nation was locked down and protests against police brutality spilled into violence in major cities, Caplinger said being told the election was stolen was one poke too many.

Caplinger said he drove to Washington, D.C. after Trump encouraged supporters to air their grievances about the election, tweeting “Big protest in DC on January 6th. Be there, will be wild!”



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“When I heard that President Trump had tweeted to be there, it’ll be wild, I was like ‘Oh, that sounds interesting,’” Caplinger said.

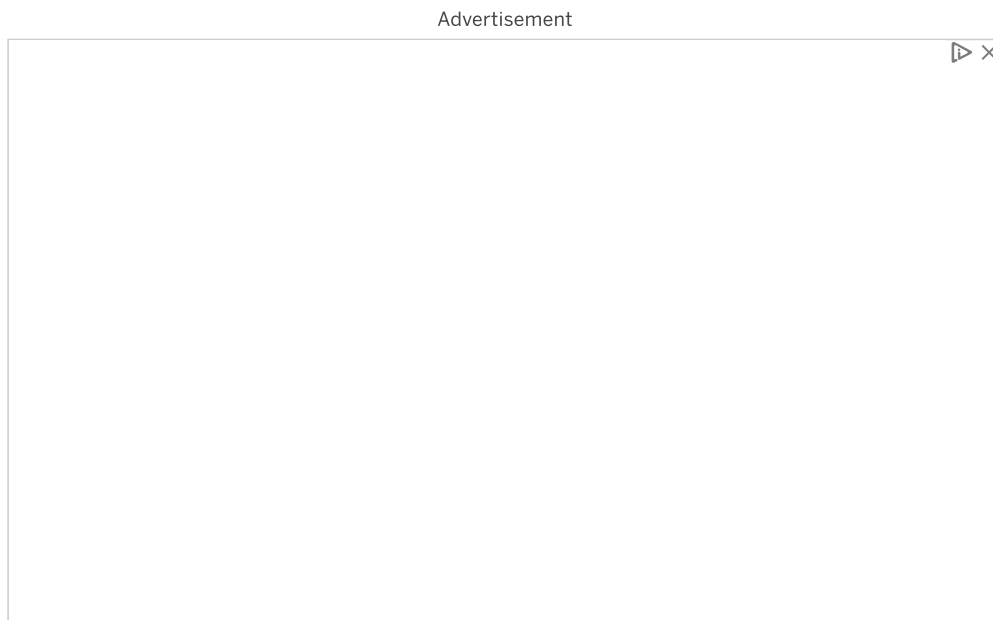
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Caplinger told MLive he was among the thousands who breached the Capitol, scaling a wall to get inside and then exploring the halls. He left when the situation started to escalate, he said.

Caplinger has not been charged, nor has he been contacted by police, he said. The FBI declined to comment on whether he is the subject of an investigation.



Trump summoned “patriots” from across the country to gather in the capital on the day a procedural vote would seal his electoral defeat. In a speech that served as the foundation of a second impeachment trial, the former president clung to rejected claims that widespread fraud disenfranchised his voters.



Trump pledged to “never concede” to now-President Joe Biden. He told supporters to fight, told them they could be stuck with a president who lost the election but promised: “We’re just not going to let that happen.”

“Our country has had enough,” Trump said on Jan. 6. “We will not take it anymore and that’s what this is all about. To use a favorite term that all of you people really came up with, we will stop the steal.”

Caplinger said he was eager to hear the president speak, driving more than 500 miles to be there. He clasped a wooden stick bearing a Trump flag and the American flag while he listened.

Trump had faced a “high tech lynching” from social media companies that marked his statements about election fraud as inaccurate, Caplinger said. The Michigan native felt judges hadn’t given rejected legal challenges a fair shake and argued discredited analyses of ballot returns should have been given more attention.

Hearing Trump tell the crowd they should march to the Capitol gave Caplinger hope that the election may not be over. The former president ended his speech with the words: “We fight. We fight like hell and if you don’t fight like hell, you’re not going to have a country anymore. So let’s walk down Pennsylvania Avenue.”

Caplinger said he had attended Trump’s campaign rallies in Muskegon and Freeland last year. Like those events, the president’s words filled him with energy.

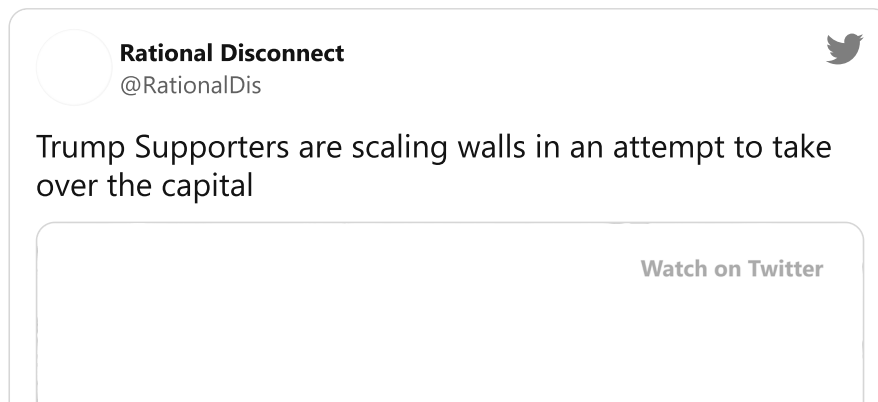
“(Trump’s speech) was powerful. It was driving. He laid out what our grievances are. He was repeating the grievances we all had there,” Caplinger said.

Caplinger joined thousands of Trump supporters as they marched toward the Capitol.

The country is still coming to terms with what happened next.

‘It looked fun’

Caplinger said he joined the march to “peacefully and patriotically express my voice to the senators as President Trump had said.” The protest did not stay peaceful for long.



Protesters blew past Capitol police protecting the building, in some cases violently clashing with officers. The mob of rioters, some wearing helmets and protective gear, broke into the Capitol and forced members of Congress to evacuate.

Caplinger said he scaled a wall and entered the Capitol through an open doorway that was tightly packed with other protesters. Capitol police let him pass by without opposition, he said.

“It looked fun,” Caplinger said.

Images and videos taken during the riots depict a chaotic scene.

Five deaths would be associated with the insurrection, including a Capitol police officer who was beaten by protesters and a woman who was fatally shot by police. Nearly 140 officers sustained injuries ranging from bruises and cuts to concussions and fractured bones, according to evidence presented in Trump’s impeachment trial.

Caplinger described his experience as largely pleasant, at first.

"It was really fascinating," he said. "I've never been there before so I looked around, I started following people."

"I came across people taking pictures and videos live chats. I was walking toward one of the other entrances, they had the one they had actually broke through with broken glass and everything. I ended up walking toward there and looking at the damage and just exploring for the most part."

Caplinger said white gas from a fire extinguisher filled the air after a rioter used it to fend off police. He started moving toward the House Chamber and heard people trying to break in.

U.S. Rep. Dan Kildee, D-Flint Twp., said he was forced to lay on the ground in the House Chamber as Capitol Police protected representatives from rioters entering the building. U.S. Rep. Bill Huizenga, R-Zeeland, said his colleagues mentally braced themselves to fight off Trump supporters who were breaking into the House floor.

"We were ready, people were grabbing stuff getting ready to defend ourselves," Huizenga said in an interview. "The irony is that most of the people that were lining up, standing there ready to do that are supporters of the president, ready to try to battle back supporters of the president. That was a sad irony right there."

Kildee removed his congressional pin as the mob attempted to breach the House chambers to prevent rioters from identifying him. Kildee was evacuated after being trapped in the House gallery for roughly 30 minutes.

"I called my wife, and it wasn't until I heard her voice that I thought 'wow this is like one of those calls you hear about,'" Kildee said. "I didn't know what was going to happen. None of us did."

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Caplinger said he saw people kicking on the doors of the House chamber. He witnessed another person urinating in the corner.

"After I started seeing stuff like that. I just had the feeling of, 'Hey maybe I should just leave. This does not look correct,'" he said. "After seeing the damage and seeing broken things, it's like this not gonna end well for anyone now. It's one thing for them to stand there and let us in or whatnot, but there's glass, there's blood. There's urination. I don't even want to know what that brown stuff is. I got the feeling of impending 'I need to leave now.'"

Caplinger said his escape was blocked by a crowd of people. He witnessed officers coming with their guns drawn and tried to warn other people.

"Then I saw people on the ground, hands up facedown on the ground and I walked my happy little ass back down those stairs, pushed my way through the crowd ... and I got out of there," Caplinger said.

"I went outside to catch my breath. It was hot. People were being pushed in there, I was almost pushed down a flight of stairs because they were getting so pushy. I ended up walking to the front most part of the Capitol building started catching my breath and they were playing Rage Against the Machine down there. Then they started playing Beastie Boys 'Fight For Your Right to Party.'"

Caplinger said he checked his phone and saw Trump had tweeted a video message telling his supporters to leave. Trump still affirmed the election was "stolen from us" and told his supporters "we love you. You're very special."

"President Trump tweeted his videos saying 'Hey, everyone needs to go home.' It was like OK, time to go," Caplinger said.

He drove back to Michigan that night.

'My rage is great'

Rioters succeeded in delaying the certification of the Electoral College result, but Congress reconvened to affirm Biden's victory later that night.

Biden was inaugurated on Jan. 20 without incident. Federal officials still warn of possible threats stemming from the election.

Weeks later, a national manhunt has resulted in hundreds of arrests. Three men from Michigan face federal charges for their role in the riots.

Michael Foy, a Wixom native, was arrested for allegedly assaulting police with a hockey stick. Two other men, Karl Dresch and James Mels, face charges for knowingly entering a restricted building and violent entry and disorderly conduct on Capitol grounds.

Caplinger has been identified by online sleuths who are connecting social media profiles to photos and images taken at the Capitol. He told MLive he has no regrets.

"I didn't break nothing, I didn't destroy nothing," Caplinger said. "I hurt no one. I came there, I made my voice heard. When I seen bad things start happening I left ... To have a regret means to have done something wrong. To have done something wrong would mean I broke something, destroyed something or whatever. No."

Caplinger still expresses an intense loyalty to Trump, who ran for office while Caplinger was homeless and living out of his car, he said. Since 2016, Caplinger found a stable job as a maintenance technician, bought a house and celebrated the birth of his first daughter. He attributes the success to the former president.

Caplinger said he lost his job this month over his refusal to wear a mask.

Trump's 2016 campaign awakened Caplinger's awareness of politics. Now he's exploring a possible campaign to either represent Michigan's 12th state House District or become the mayor of Taylor.

He said a run for political office is a positive outlet for the rage he feels as the country seems to be coming undone.

"My rage toward the establishment, Democrats and RINO Republicans is great," Caplinger said. "Think of Pompeii when it was destroyed by Mount Vesuvius."

However, Caplinger expressed no sympathy toward lawmakers who thought they might die of rioters caught up to them.

"If you take a job, you take on the responsibility of that job and everything and anything that comes with it," Caplinger said. "So, to members of Congress that sit there like AOC (and say) 'I almost died.' Then why don't you quit and go do something else. If you feel that strongly about it, leave."

Caplinger also hesitated to condemn the actions of others who took a more violent role in the protest. He said Trump supporters are being unfairly demonized as "insurrectionists" after Black Lives Matter protesters had their turn to rebel in the streets.

"I don't think it was a great evil," Caplinger said of the Jan. 6 riot. "I think it was a great stupid thing when it came to breaking and destroying things, sure. I'm sure we can all agree on that, but I will not sit here and allow people to constantly demonize, patronize, criticize and try to ostracize Trump supporters for doing what they believe in."

Editor's Note: This story was updated to clarify the position of members of Congress during the Jan. 6 riot.

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