

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
Before the
SECURITIES AND EXCHANGE COMMISSION

SECURITIES EXCHANGE ACT OF 1934
Release No. 90014 / September 25, 2020

INVESTMENT ADVISERS ACT OF 1940
Release No. 5596 / September 25, 2020

ADMINISTRATIVE PROCEEDING
File No. 3-20081

In the Matter of

**CREATIVE FINANCIAL
DESIGNS, INC.,**

Respondent.

**ORDER INSTITUTING ADMINISTRATIVE
AND CEASE-AND-DESIST PROCEEDINGS
PURSUANT TO SECTION 15(b) OF THE
SECURITIES EXCHANGE ACT OF 1934
AND SECTIONS 203(e) AND 203(k) OF THE
INVESTMENT ADVISERS ACT OF 1940,
MAKING FINDINGS, AND IMPOSING
REMEDIAL SANCTIONS AND A CEASE-
AND-DESIST ORDER**

I.

The Securities and Exchange Commission (“Commission”) deems it appropriate and in the public interest that public administrative and cease-and-desist proceedings be, and hereby are, instituted pursuant to Section 15(b) of the Securities Exchange Act of 1934 (“Exchange Act”) and Sections 203(e) and 203(k) of the Investment Advisers Act of 1940 (“Advisers Act”) against Creative Financial Designs, Inc. (“Creative” or “Respondent”).

II.

In anticipation of the institution of these proceedings, Respondent has submitted an Offer of Settlement (the “Offer”), which the Commission has determined to accept. Solely for the purpose of these proceedings and any other proceedings brought by or on behalf of the Commission, or to which the Commission is a party, and without admitting or denying the findings herein, except as to the Commission’s jurisdiction over it and the subject matter of these proceedings, which are admitted, Respondent consents to the entry of this Order Instituting Administrative and Cease-and-Desist Proceedings Pursuant to Section 15(b) of the Securities Exchange Act of 1934 and Sections 203(e) and 203(k) of the Investment Advisers Act of 1940, Making Findings, and Imposing Remedial Sanctions and a Cease-and-Desist Order (“Order”), as set forth below.

III.

On the basis of this Order and Respondent's Offer, the Commission finds¹ that:

Summary

1. These proceedings arise out of breaches of fiduciary duty by Creative, a registered investment adviser, in connection with its mutual fund share class selection practices and the receipt of certain revenue sharing payments by its affiliated broker-dealer, cfd Investments, Inc. ("CFD"). First, from January 2014 through March 2019 (the "Relevant Period"), Creative purchased, recommended, or held for advisory clients mutual fund share classes that charged 12b-1 fees pursuant to Rule 12b-1 under the Investment Company Act of 1940 ("12b-1 fees") instead of lower-cost share classes of the same funds that were available to the clients. CFD and Creative's investment adviser representatives, in their capacity as registered representatives of CFD, received 12b-1 fees in connection with these investments, but Creative did not adequately disclose this conflict of interest in its Forms ADV or otherwise. Further, by causing certain advisory clients to invest in mutual fund share classes that charged 12b-1 fees when other share classes of the same funds that presented a more favorable value for these clients under the particular circumstances in place at the time of the transactions were available to the clients, Creative breached its duty to seek best execution for those transactions.

2. Second, during the Relevant Period, Creative failed to disclose to its clients compensation that CFD received through agreements with two third-party broker-dealers (the "Clearing Brokers") and conflicts arising from that compensation. Pursuant to the agreements, the Clearing Brokers agreed to share with CFD certain revenues that the Clearing Brokers received from the mutual funds that Creative recommended to its clients. Clearing Broker 1 agreed to share with CFD a certain percentage of revenue that Clearing Broker 1 received from the mutual funds for performing certain administrative services (referred to as the "networking revenue program"). Clearing Broker 2 agreed to share with CFD a portion of revenue that Clearing Broker 2 received from the mutual funds in Clearing Broker 2's no-transaction-fee ("NTF") mutual fund program (the "NTF program"). These payments to CFD created a conflict of interest in that they provided a financial incentive for Creative to favor the mutual funds in the networking revenue and NTF programs over other investments when giving investment advice to its advisory clients.

3. Furthermore, Creative failed to adopt and implement written compliance policies and procedures reasonably designed to prevent violations of the Advisers Act and the rules thereunder in connection with its mutual fund share class selection practices and revenue sharing practices.

¹ The findings herein are made pursuant to Respondent's Offer of Settlement and are not binding on any other person or entity in this or any other proceeding.

4. Creative, although eligible to do so, did not self-report to the Commission pursuant to the Division of Enforcement's (the "Division") Share Class Selection Disclosure Initiative ("SCSD Initiative").²

Respondent

5. Respondent Creative Financial Designs, Inc., incorporated in Indiana and headquartered in Kokomo, Indiana, has been registered with the Commission as an investment adviser since 2001. Creative's affiliated broker-dealer, cfd Investments, Inc., has been registered with the Commission as a broker-dealer since 1989. CFD is affiliated with Creative through common ownership and control. Throughout the Relevant Period, CFD acted as the introducing broker-dealer for Creative's advisory clients. In its Form ADV dated March 30, 2020, Creative reported that it had approximately \$1 billion in discretionary regulatory assets under management.

Mutual Fund Share Class Selection

6. Mutual funds typically offer investors different types of shares or "share classes." Each share class represents an interest in the same portfolio of securities with the same investment objective. The primary difference among the share classes is the fee structure.

7. For example, some mutual fund share classes charge 12b-1 fees to cover certain costs of fund distribution and sometimes shareholder services. These recurring fees, which are included in a mutual fund's total annual fund operating expenses, vary by share class, but typically range from 25 to 100 basis points. They are deducted from the mutual fund's assets on an ongoing basis and paid to the fund's distributor or principal underwriter, which generally remits the 12b-1 fees to the broker-dealer that distributed or sold the shares.

8. Many mutual funds also offer share classes that do not charge 12b-1 fees (e.g., "Institutional Class" or "Class I" shares (collectively, "Class I shares")).³ An investor who holds Class I shares of a mutual fund will usually pay lower total annual fund operating expenses over time – and thus will generally earn higher returns – than one who holds a share class of the same fund that charges 12b-1 fees. Therefore, if a mutual fund offers a Class I share, and an investor is eligible to own it, it is often, though not always, better for the investor to purchase or hold the Class I share.

9. During the Relevant Period, Creative purchased or held for clients⁴ mutual fund share classes that charged 12b-1 fees when lower-cost share classes of those same funds were

² See Div. of Enforcement, U.S. Sec. & Exch. Comm'n, *Share Class Selection Disclosure Initiative*, <https://www.sec.gov/enforce/announcement/scsd-initiative> (last modified Feb. 12, 2018).

³ Share classes that do not charge 12b-1 fees also go by a variety of other names in the mutual fund industry, such as "Class F2," "Class Y" and "Class Z" shares. As used in this Order, the term "Class I shares" refers generically to share classes that do not charge 12b-1 fees.

⁴ In many cases, mutual funds permit certain advisory clients who hold shares in classes charging 12b-1 fees to convert those shares to Class I shares without cost or tax consequences to the client.

available to those clients. CFD received at least \$280,382 in 12b-1 fees that it would not have collected had Creative's advisory clients been invested in the available lower-cost share classes.

Revenue Sharing with the Clearing Brokers

10. From at least 2014, CFD engaged the Clearing Brokers to provide clearing and custody services for the majority of Creative's advisory clients. The Clearing Brokers provide trade execution, custody of assets, and reporting services.

11. During the Relevant Period, CFD participated in the Clearing Brokers' networking revenue and NTF programs, respectively. The terms of CFD's participation were set forth in agreements with the Clearing Brokers. Under the agreements, Clearing Broker 1 agreed to share with CFD a certain amount of revenue that it received from its networking revenue program, and Clearing Broker 2 agreed to share with CFD a certain amount of revenue it received from the mutual funds in its NTF program.

12. During the Relevant Period, Creative purchased or held for clients mutual funds that were part of the networking revenue or NTF programs and the Clearing Brokers shared revenues of at least \$289,134 with CFD as a result of making or holding these investments on behalf of clients.

Disclosure Failures

13. During the Relevant Period, Creative disclosed in its Forms ADV: "Clients may pay certain fees and charges which are in addition to Applicant's fees. Such fees and charges may include, but are not necessarily limited to....Management and other fees on open-end and closed-end mutual fund shares and UIT [unit investment trusts]." As an investment adviser, Creative was obligated to disclose all material facts to its advisory clients, including any conflicts of interest between itself and/or its associated persons and its clients that could affect the advisory relationship and how those conflicts could affect the advice Creative provided its clients.

14. To meet this fiduciary obligation, Creative is required to provide its advisory clients with full and fair disclosure that is sufficiently specific so that they can understand the conflicts of interest concerning Creative's advice about investing in different mutual funds and classes of mutual funds and have an informed basis on which they can consent to or reject the conflicts.

15. Creative did not adequately disclose all material facts regarding the conflict of interest that arose when it purchased or held for its clients a share class that would generate 12b-1 fee revenue for CFD and Creative's investment adviser representatives in their capacity as registered representatives of CFD while a share class of the same fund was available that would not provide CFD and the investment adviser representatives with that additional compensation. Creative also did not disclose that CFD received revenue sharing payments from the Clearing Brokers based on Creative client assets invested in the networking revenue or NTF programs or that these payments created a conflict of interest.

Best Execution Failures

16. An investment adviser's fiduciary duty includes, among other things, an obligation to seek best execution for client transactions.⁵

17. By causing certain advisory clients to invest in fund share classes that charged 12b-1 fees when share classes of the same funds were available to the clients that presented a more favorable value under the particular circumstances in place at the time of the transactions, Creative violated its duty to seek best execution for those transactions.

Compliance Deficiencies

18. During the Relevant Period, Creative failed to adopt and implement written policies and procedures reasonably designed to prevent violations of the Advisers Act and the rules thereunder in connection with disclosure of conflicts of interest presented by its mutual fund share class selection practices and revenue sharing practices, or in connection with making recommendations of mutual funds and mutual fund share classes that were in the best interests of its advisory clients.

Violations

19. As a result of the conduct described above, Respondent willfully⁶ violated Section 206(2) of the Advisers Act, which makes it unlawful for any investment adviser, directly or indirectly, to "engage in any transaction, practice or course of business which operates as a fraud or deceit upon any client or prospective client." Scierter is not required to establish a violation of Section 206(2), but rather a violation may rest on a finding of negligence. *SEC v. Steadman*, 967 F.2d 636, 643 n.5 (D.C. Cir. 1992) (citing *SEC v. Capital Gains Research Bureau, Inc.*, 375 U.S. 180, 194-95 (1963)).

20. As a result of the conduct described above, Respondent willfully violated Section 206(4) of the Advisers Act and Rule 206(4)-7 thereunder, which require a registered investment adviser to adopt and implement written compliance policies and procedures reasonably designed to prevent violations of the Advisers Act and the rules thereunder.

⁵ See, e.g., Interpretive Release Concerning the Scope of Section 28(e) of the Securities Exchange Act of 1934 and Related Matters, Exchange Act Rel. No. 23170 (Apr. 28, 1986).

⁶ "Willfully," for purposes of imposing relief under Section 15(b) of the Exchange Act and Section 203(e) of the Advisers Act, "means no more than that the person charged with the duty knows what he is doing." *Wonsover v. SEC*, 205 F.3d 408, 414 (D.C. Cir. 2000) (quoting *Hughes v. SEC*, 174 F.2d 969, 977 (D.C. Cir. 1949)). There is no requirement that the actor "also be aware that he is violating one of the Rules or Acts." *Tager v. SEC*, 344 F.2d 5, 8 (2d Cir. 1965). The decision in *The Robare Group, Ltd. v. SEC*, which construed the term "willfully" for purposes of a differently structured statutory provision, does not alter that standard. 922 F.3d 468, 478-79 (D.C. Cir. 2019) (setting forth the showing required to establish that a person has "willfully omit[ted]" material information from a required disclosure in violation of Section 207 of the Advisers Act).

Creative's Remedial Efforts

21. Although Creative did not self-report pursuant to the SCSD Initiative even though it was eligible to do so, in determining to accept the Offer, the Commission considered other remedial acts promptly undertaken by Creative and cooperation afforded the Commission staff.

Undertakings

22. Respondent has undertaken to:

- a. Within 30 days of the entry of this Order, review and correct as necessary all relevant disclosure documents concerning mutual fund share class selection, 12b-1 fees, and revenue sharing arrangements.
- b. Within 30 days of the entry of this Order, evaluate whether existing clients should be moved to a lower-cost share class and move clients as necessary.
- c. Within 30 days of the entry of this Order, evaluate, update (if necessary), and review for the effectiveness of their implementation, Respondent's policies and procedures so that they are reasonably designed to prevent violations of the Advisers Act in connection with disclosures regarding mutual fund share class selection and in connection with making recommendations of mutual funds and mutual fund share classes that are in the best interests of Respondent's advisory clients.
- d. Within 30 days of the entry of this Order, notify affected investors (*i.e.*, those former and current clients who, during the Relevant Period of inadequate disclosure, purchased or held 12b-1 fee paying share class mutual funds when a lower-cost share class of the same fund was available to the client or revenue share paying mutual funds (hereinafter, "affected investors")) of the settlement terms of this Order by sending a copy of this Order to each affected investor via mail, email, or such other method not unacceptable to the Commission staff, together with a cover letter in a form not unacceptable to the Commission staff. CFD will also comply with all disclosure obligations under the Advisers Act concerning this Order, including providing a notification of this Order in the Item 2 "Material Changes Since Last Annual Update" section of any brochure required under Rule 204-3 of the Advisers Act.
- e. Within 40 days of the entry of this Order, certify, in writing, compliance with the undertaking(s), provide written evidence of compliance in the form of a narrative, and be supported by exhibits sufficient to demonstrate compliance. The certification and supporting material shall be submitted to Ian S. Karpel, Assistant Regional Director, Denver Regional Office, Securities and Exchange Commission, Byron G. Rogers Federal Building, 1961 Stout Street, Suite 1700, Denver, CO 80294-1961, or such other address as the Commission staff may provide, with a

copy to the Office of Chief Counsel of the Division of Enforcement, Securities and Exchange Commission, 100 F. Street, NE, Washington, DC 20549.

f. For good cause shown, the Commission staff may extend any of the procedural dates relating to these undertakings. Deadlines for procedural dates shall be counted in calendar days, except that if the last day falls on a weekend or federal holiday, the next business day shall be considered the last day.

IV.

In view of the foregoing, the Commission deems it appropriate, and in the public interest to impose the sanctions agreed to in Respondent's Offer.

Accordingly, pursuant to Section 15(b) of the Exchange Act and Sections 203(e) and 203(k) of the Advisers Act, it is hereby ORDERED that:

A. Respondent cease and desist from committing or causing any violations and any future violations of Sections 206(2) and 206(4) of the Advisers Act and Rule 206(4)-7 promulgated thereunder.

B. Respondent is censured.

C. Respondent shall pay disgorgement, prejudgment interest, and a civil penalty to affected investors, totaling \$890,240 as follows:

(i) Respondent shall pay disgorgement of \$569,516 and prejudgment interest of \$108,424, consistent with the provisions of this Subsection C.

(ii) Respondent shall pay a civil money penalty in the amount of \$212,300, consistent with the provisions of this Subsection C.

(iii) Within ten (10) days of the entry of this Order, Respondent shall deposit the full amount of the disgorgement, prejudgment interest, and civil penalty (the "Fair Fund"), into an escrow account at a financial institution not unacceptable to the Commission staff and Respondent shall provide evidence of such deposit in a form acceptable to the Commission staff. If timely deposit is not made, additional interest shall accrue pursuant to SEC Rule of Practice 600 [17 C.F.R. § 201.600] and/or 31 U.S.C. § 3717.

(iv) Pursuant to Section 308(a) of the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002, as amended, a Fair Fund is created for the penalties, disgorgement, and prejudgment interest referenced in this Subsection C. Amounts ordered to be paid as civil money penalties pursuant to this Order shall be treated as penalties paid to the government for all purposes, including all tax purposes. To preserve the deterrent effect of the civil penalty, Respondent agrees that in any Related Investor Action, it shall not argue that it is entitled to, nor shall it benefit by, offset or reduction of any award of

compensatory damages by the amount of any part of Respondent's payment of a civil penalty in this action ("Penalty Offset"). If the court in any Related Investor Action grants such a Penalty Offset, Respondent agrees that it shall, within 30 days after entry of a final order granting the Penalty Offset, notify the Commission's counsel in this action and pay the amount of the Penalty Offset to the Securities and Exchange Commission. Such a payment shall not be deemed an additional civil penalty and shall not be deemed to change the amount of the civil penalty imposed in this proceeding. For purposes of this paragraph, a "Related Investor Action" means a private damages action brought against Respondent by or on behalf of one or more investors based on substantially the same facts as alleged in the Order instituted by the Commission in this proceeding.

(v) Respondent shall be responsible for administering the Fair Fund and may hire a professional not unacceptable to the staff of the Commission, at its own cost, to assist it in the administration of the distribution. The costs and expenses of administering the Fair Fund, including any such professional services, shall be borne by Respondent and shall not be paid out of the Fair Fund.

(vi) Respondent shall distribute from the Fair Fund to each affected investor an amount representing: (a) the 12b-1 fees attributable to the affected investor during the Relevant Period; (b) the revenue sharing payments attributable to the affected investor during the Relevant Period; and (c) reasonable interest paid on such fees, pursuant to a disbursement calculation (the "Calculation") that will be submitted to, reviewed, and approved by the Commission staff in accordance with this Subsection C. The Calculation shall be subject to a *de minimis* threshold. No portion of the Fair Fund shall be paid to any affected investor account in which Respondent or its past or present officers or directors have a financial interest.

(vii) Respondent shall, within ninety (90) days of the entry of this Order, submit a Calculation to the Commission staff for review and approval. At or around the time of submission of the proposed Distribution Calculation to the staff, Respondents shall make themselves available, and shall require any third-parties or professionals retained by Respondents to assist in formulating the methodology for its Calculation and/or administration of the Distribution to be available, for a conference call with the Commission staff to explain the methodology used in preparing the proposed Calculations and its implementation, and to provide the staff with an opportunity to ask questions. Respondent shall also provide to the Commission staff such additional information and supporting documentation as the Commission staff may request for the purpose of its review. In the event of one or more objections by the Commission staff to Respondent's proposed Calculation or any of its information or supporting documentation, Respondent shall submit a revised Calculation for the review and approval of the Commission staff or additional information or supporting documentation within ten (10) days of the date that Respondent is notified of the objection. The revised Calculation shall be subject to all of the provisions of this Subsection C.

(viii) Respondent shall, within thirty (30) days of the written approval of the Calculation by the Commission staff, submit a payment file (the “Payment File”) for review and acceptance by the Commission staff demonstrating the application of the methodology to each affected investor. The Payment File should identify, at a minimum: (1) the name of each affected investor, (2) the exact amount of the payment to be made from the Fair Fund to each affected investor, (3) the application of a *de minimis* threshold, and (4) the amount of reasonable interest paid.

(ix) Respondent shall disburse all amounts payable to affected investors within ninety (90) days of the date the Commission staff accepts the Payment File unless such time period is extended as provided in Paragraph (xiii) of this Subsection C. Respondents shall notify the Commission staff of the date[s] and the amount paid in the initial distribution. If, after reasonable efforts to distribute the Fair Fund pursuant to the approved Payment File, Respondent is unable to distribute any portion of the Fair Fund for good cause, including factors beyond Respondent’s control, Respondent shall transfer any such undistributed funds to the Commission for transmittal to the United States Treasury in accordance with Section 21F(g)(3) of the Securities Exchange Act of 1934 when the distribution of the funds is complete and before the final accounting provided for in Paragraph (xi) below is submitted to the Commission staff. Any such payment shall be made in accordance with Paragraph (xiv) below.

(x) A Fair Fund is a Qualified Settlement Fund (“QSF”) under Section 468B(g) of the Internal Revenue Code (“IRC”), 26 U.S.C. §§1.468B.1-1.468B.5. Respondent agrees to be responsible for all tax compliance responsibilities associated with distribution of the Fair Fund, including but not limited to tax obligations resulting from the Fair Fund’s status as a QSF and the Foreign Account Tax Compliance Act (“FATCA”), and may retain any professional services necessary. The costs and expenses of any such professional services shall be borne by Respondent and shall not be paid by the Fair Fund.

(xi) Within one hundred fifty (150) days after Respondent completes the distribution of all amounts payable to the affected investors, Respondent shall return all undisbursed funds to the Commission pursuant to the instruction set forth in Paragraph (xiv) of this Subsection C. Respondent shall then submit to the Commission staff a final accounting and certification of the disposition of the Fair Fund for Commission approval. The final accounting shall be in a format to be provided by the Commission staff. The final accounting and certification shall include, but not be limited to: (1) the amount paid to each affected investor, with reasonable interest; (2) the date of each payment; (3) the check number or other identifier of money transferred or credited to each affected investor; (4) the amount of any returned payment and the date received; (5) a description of any effort to locate an affected investor whose payment was returned or to whom payment was not made for any reason; (6) the total amount, if any, to be forwarded to the Commission for transfer to the United States Treasury; and (7) an affirmation that

Respondent has made payments from the Fair Fund to affected investors in accordance with the Payment File approved by the Commission staff. Respondent shall submit the final accounting and certification, together with proof and supporting documentation of such payment in a form acceptable to Commission staff, under a cover letter that identifies Creative Financial Designs, Inc. as the Respondent in these proceedings and the file number of these proceedings to Ian S. Karpel, Assistant Regional Director, Denver Regional Office, Securities and Exchange Commission, Byron G. Rogers Federal Building, 1961 Stout Street, Suite 1700, Denver, CO 80294-1961, or such other address as the Commission staff may provide. Any and all supporting documentation for the accounting and certification shall be provided to the Commission staff upon request, and Respondent shall cooperate with any additional requests by the Commission staff in connection with the accounting and certification.

(xii) After Respondent has submitted the final accounting to the Commission staff, the staff shall submit the final accounting to the Commission for approval and shall request Commission approval to send any undistributed amount to the United States Treasury.

(xiii) The Commission staff may extend any of the procedural dates set forth in Paragraphs (ii) through (xi) of this Subsection C for good cause shown. Deadlines for dates relating to the Fair Fund shall be counted in calendar days, except if the last day falls on a weekend or federal holiday, the next business day shall be considered the last day.

(xiv) Respondent's transfer of any undistributed funds to the Commission for transmittal to the United States Treasury must be made in one of the following ways:

(a) Respondent may transmit payment electronically to the Commission, which will provide detailed ACH transfer/Fedwire instructions upon request;

(b) Respondent may make direct payment from a bank account via Pay.gov through the SEC website at <http://www.sec.gov/about/offices/ofm.htm>; or

(c) Respondent may pay by certified check, bank cashier's check, or United States postal money order, made payable to the Securities and Exchange Commission and hand-delivered or mailed to:

Enterprise Services Center
Accounts Receivable Branch
HQ Bldg., Room 181, AMZ-341
6500 South MacArthur Boulevard
Oklahoma City, OK 73169

Payments by check or money order must be accompanied by a cover letter identifying Respondent as a Respondent in these proceedings, and the file number of these proceedings; a copy of the cover letter and check or money order must be sent to Ian S. Karpel, Assistant Regional Director, Denver Regional Office, Securities and Exchange Commission, Byron G. Rogers Federal Building, 1961 Stout Street, Suite 1700, Denver, CO 80294-1961, or such other address as the Commission staff may provide.

D. Respondent shall comply with the undertakings enumerated in Section III, paragraphs 22.a through 22.e above.

By the Commission.

Vanessa A. Countryman
Secretary