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**SOUTH OZONE PARK MAN SENTENCED TO ONE TO THREE YEARS IN PRISON AND MUST PAY \$335,256 FOR DEED FRAUD SCHEME TO STEAL HOMES IN SOUTHEAST QUEENS**

*Five Properties Restored to Rightful Owners in Hearing*

Queens District Attorney Melinda Katz announced today that her office prevailed in a hearing to restore eight deeds associated with five properties to their rightful owners after they had been stolen by Justin Joseph of South Ozone Park in a deed fraud scheme.

The statute utilized by the District Attorney's office in Tuesday's hearing before Supreme Court Justice Leigh K. Cheng allows for the Court to void deeds that were subject to criminal prosecution upon a guilty plea. The hearing spared the victims the time and expense of additional legal proceedings in civil court.

Joseph pleaded guilty in May and was sentenced on June 24, 2024, to one to three years in prison for the theft of the five properties in Southeast Queens. As part of his plea, Joseph agreed to cooperate in the voiding of the fraudulent deeds, and signed a confession of judgment for \$335,256, returning the proceeds he received from the fraudulent sale of two of the homes. His wife, Latoya Hewitt, pleaded guilty the same day to charges related to the scheme.

District Attorney Katz said: "This is a strong disposition. Defendant Justin Joseph must now serve one to three years in prison, pay back more than \$335,000 he tried to steal from fraudulent property sales, and five properties will be restored to their rightful owners. My Housing & Worker Protection Bureau filed a motion in Criminal Court to void eight fraudulent deeds in this scheme and we were victorious in court this week. There will be no windfall for predators who try to scam homeowners in Queens."

Joseph, 45, of 132<sup>nd</sup> Street in South Ozone Park, pleaded guilty in May before Justice Cheng to scheme to defraud in the first degree and three counts of offering a false instrument for filing in the first degree.

Hewitt, 49, of 132<sup>nd</sup> Street in South Ozone Park, pleaded guilty to offering a false instrument for filing in the second degree. She was sentenced to a one-year conditional discharge after agreeing to cooperate in the voiding of one of the deeds and make restitution of \$48,751.48.

The couple were arrested in April following a long-term investigation into the deed fraud by the Queens District Attorney's Housing & Worker Protection Bureau and the New York City Sheriff's Office.

There were eight deeds involved because two of the properties changed hands more than once.

According to the charges and plea agreements:

- On March 25, 2019, Joseph and Hewitt filed a false document with the New York City Department of Finance recording a deed transfer of a home on Pinegrove Street in Jamaica from a 78-year-old woman, who was its rightful owner, to Hewitt.
- The deed included the seal of a notary public who denied that it was his signature on the document and that the seal was authentic.
- Hewitt, while acting in concert with her husband, proceeded to sell the home. She obtained a forged death certificate to facilitate the transaction.
- The property sold in November 2019 for \$315,000. She received a check for proceeds of \$48,751.48 and her husband and his mother received a check for \$40,000 each.
- In September 2019, Joseph filed a false deed transferring property on 181<sup>st</sup> Street in Springfield Gardens to himself. He forged the signature of the rightful owner, who lived elsewhere.
- In November 2019, he sold the home for \$355,000. Joseph received a check for \$255,256.76.
- The home was later demolished, which the rightful owner discovered when she drove by the property. A new home was built in its place.
- In December 2019, Joseph submitted a false deed to the city to transfer property on 155<sup>th</sup> Street in Jamaica to himself. He falsely represented that he bought the property for \$50,000.
- In March 2020, Joseph submitted a fraudulent deed transfer to the city and forged the signature of the rightful owner of a property on 207<sup>th</sup> Street in Queens Village.
- In April 2020, Joseph submitted a deed transfer to the city for a property on 131<sup>st</sup> Street in South Ozone Park. He forged the real owner's signature and created a fake identify for himself.

The investigation was conducted by Assistant District Attorneys Christina Hanophy, Senior Deputy Chief, and Rachel Stein, Deputy Chief, of the Queens District Attorney's Housing & Worker Protection Bureau assisted by Detective Kevin Acon of the New York City Sheriff's Office under the supervision of the New York City Department of Finance.

ADAs Stein and Hanophy prosecuted the case under the supervision of Assistant District Attorney William Jorgenson, Bureau Chief, and under the overall supervision of Executive Assistant District Attorney for Investigations Gerard A. Brave.

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