

Let's not kill all the lawyers, just indict some.

An Orange County prosecutor named Robert Ostrov has the pelts of two lawyers and one fake lawyer hanging from his belt, and he's working on acquiring a fourth.

Michelle Okin of Cornwall-on-Hudson and Linda Blake of Warwick were disbarred in 2004 over crimes involving the mishandling of clients' affairs and money. Leonard Houston of Middletown pleaded guilty last year to posing as a lawyer - the second time he's engaged in such a rip-off. Houston is now in state prison.

This week, Daniel Fruitbine of Central Valley surrendered to Woodbury police and was charged with passing himself off as a lawyer, despite the fact that he'd been disbarred in 1997 for carrying a loaded, concealed and illegal handgun while he was accompanying clients on collection visits.

"I have had people say that when I walk into the courtroom, everyone starts getting nervous. I do think it instills confidence in the professions to know that the bad ones are getting put away," Ostrov said this week.

The former Nassau County assistant district attorney moved north to the Orange County district attorney's office in 2001.

Lest anyone think that Ostrov's got some kind of a grudge against his brethren of the bar, he's also prosecuted a doctor and a clergyman.

Capable guys leave Copland.

By Oliver Mackson March 10, 2006

The departures column: Two capable characters have departed Copland in the past week.

- Sgt. Jay Thompson left Warwick after 20 years, having started as a village cop in 1986. They merged with the Town of Warwick Police Department in 1992.

- Another departure will please only white-collar types with felonious thoughts in their heads.

Robert Ostrov left the Orange County district attorney's office last week to work for Peachtree Settlement Funding in Florida. During his time as a prosecutor in Goshen, Ostrov won convictions of two law-breaking lawyers – and one fake lawyer who took money from clients, even though he didn't have a law degree or a license. Ostrov also successfully prosecuted two auto-insurance scam artists from Pennsylvania who fleeced scores of people in Orange, Ulster, Rockland and Dutchess counties, most of them recent immigrants to America.

Jury convicts murder defendant

By Oliver Mackson
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Goshen - No one saw Ramsey Mitchell die in a hail of bullets in a Newburgh apartment building last year, but an Orange County Court jury yesterday found enough evidence to convict 27-year-old Garfield Jenkins of murdering Mitchell.

Jenkins, who has addresses in Newburgh and the Bronx, was convicted of all felony charges that he faced during the three-day trial: Murder, manslaughter, and weapon possession.

Jenkins faces a maximum sen-

tence of 25 years to life in state prison when he's sentenced Aug. 16 by Judge Stewart Rosenwasser. Mitchell, 36, was shot to death in what was described as a drug house at 106 Renwick St. on Oct. 30, after he and Jenkins quarreled over a woman.

Mitchell's cousin, O'Neill Mitchell, and another man, Ian Cole, both told the jury that they saw Jenkins and Kevin "Tallest"

Brooks walk into a pot smoke-filled room at 106 Renwick bearing handguns that day, and saw them both leave because Mitchell wasn't there. Cole and O'Neill Mitchell then heard gunshots, and nearly tripped over Mitchell's

body when they ran out of the house. Jenkins' lawyer, David Sachs, attacked the credibility of the witnesses. He got O'Neill Mitchell to admit that he lied in a statement to city police.

Prosecutor Robert Ostrov won over the jury with his own attacks on the credibility of defense witnesses, including a woman who had a child with Jenkins and testified on his behalf.

Jenkins was returned to Orange County Jail without bail after the verdict. Brooks disappeared after he was indicted on murder and manslaughter charges last year. Rosenwasser issued a warrant for his arrest.

Single fingerprint wins conviction in robbery

By Jessica Gardner
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Goshen — It was a single fingerprint on the sticky side of a roll of tape that convicted a Newburgh man Monday of three felonies, including first-degree robbery.

The packing tape, found at the scene of a robbery in July, was the prosecution's key piece of evidence against Joseph Perez, 36.

Perez and another man broke into a couple's New Windsor home July 17, hog-tied the couple and stole personal belongings. Perez was arrested in October. A second suspect is still on the loose, said Robert Ostrov, the assistant district attorney who prosecuted the case.

Both victims in the case testified at the week-long trial, along with a fingerprint expert and other members of law enforcement, Ostrov said.

Gary Abramson, the Legal Aid Society's chief attorney, who repre-

sented Perez, didn't call anyone to the stand. He instead focused on challenging the prosecution's evidence, and he categorized that as weak. But it was enough for the jurors, who convicted Perez of first-degree robbery, first-degree burglary and second-degree robbery, all felonies.

Perez was acquitted on two other counts of first-degree robbery and burglary. Ostrov said that may have been because neither victim actually got a clear look at the gun Perez was accused of using during the robbery.

Perez faces a maximum of 25 years in prison for the robbery case, and another two to six years for pleading guilty last month to five counts of second-degree criminal possession of a forged instrument. His sentencing on both cases is next month.

Those sentences will likely run consecutively, Ostrov said.

Perez has another felony indictment for burglary pending in Orange County Court.

Weekends behind bars for crooked fire company treasurer

By Timothy O'Connor
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Goshen – In the 100-year history of Monroe's Mombasha Fire Company, its members have faced innumerable dangerous situations.

But the biggest threat the fire company has ever faced, it turns out, was not from a raging inferno; it came from a brother firefighter.

Stephen Maher, the company's treasurer for 15 years, stole more than \$56,000 from the fire company, putting Mombasha on the brink of collapse.

"We were broke," said Richard Goldstein, the fire company president. "We were cleaned out."

Goldstein came to Orange County Court yesterday to see the former treasurer sentenced for stealing the money between mid-1998 and December 1999.

Maher, 55, of Whispering Hills, Chester, pleaded guilty last month to third-degree larceny, a felony.

Judge Nicholas DeRosa sentenced Maher yesterday to six months of weekends in Orange County Jail and five years' probation. He also ordered him to pay \$63,803 to the fire company and Sovereign Bank. Of that sum, \$56,720.97 is to go to Mombasha and its insurance company.

Goldstein discovered that the money was missing in December 1999 after reviewing the fire company's ledgers. He immediately suspended Maher.

Without loans from two members, the company would have collapsed. That a fellow volunteer firefighter did the damage, Goldstein said, made it that much more painful.

"We were part of his family for 15 years," he said. "He embarrassed us, misled us. He betrayed us."

Maher apologized for taking the money. He said he did it because he ran into severe financial problems. He asked the judge to spare him jail so that he could earn money to repay the fire company.

Assistant District Attorney Robert Ostrov asked that Maher be sent to jail for six months, saying that he put the fire company "breaths away from extinction."

DeRosa sentenced Maher to weekends in jail so that he could continue working and start paying \$1,100 a month restitution to the fire company.

"The loss has to be made whole so the victim can be made whole," the judge said.

January 24, 2002

Embezzler gets 2 to 6 years

By Timothy O'Connor
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New Windsor – Louis Greenblatt was convicted five years ago of embezzling \$200,000 from his California employer. The judge placed him on 10 years probation and ordered him to repay the money.

Now living in New Windsor, Greenblatt got a job as an office administrator at Orthopedics and Sports Medicine on Blooming Grove Turnpike.

Within a couple of months of his October 2000 hire, Greenblatt was stealing from his new employers. He admitted in December that he stole about \$65,000 over a six-month period before his arrest in July. He was sentenced yesterday in Orange County Court in Goshen to two to six years in state prison for second-degree grand larceny.

Prosecutor Robert Ostrov said it's likely that Greenblatt was robbing in New Windsor to pay California.

"One can assume it was in part to pay back the restitution in California," he said.

Greenblatt, 48, said he suffered from Parkinson's Disease and needed money to pay for the medical treatment.

Ostrov said Greenblatt illegally tacked \$5,000 on to his \$80,000-a-year salary with a few keystrokes on a computer.

He also illegally paid himself periodic bonuses of \$5,000 to \$10,000.

Judge Stewart Rosenwasser had little sympathy for Greenblatt or his lawyer Gary Abramson's pleas for leniency, noting that it was Greenblatt's second offense.

"You're a selfish, greedy man, Mr. Greenblatt," the judge said. "And you're at the end of the line."

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For bilking elderly, former Newburgh funeral director gets prison

By Timothy O'Connor
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Goshen – As he awaited sentencing yesterday, John Furey clasped his hands in front of him and rocked back and forth as if in prayer.

If he was praying for mercy, he didn't get it.

Orange County Court Judge Stewart Rosenwasser sentenced Furey to one to three years in state prison for stealing more than \$24,000 from people who paid the former funeral director in advance for funeral services he never delivered.

Furey and his lawyer, Mickey Steiman, asked Rosenwasser for probation, saying that was the best way to ensure Furey could pay back his victims in a timely manner.

Not good enough, the judge said.

"You can't un-ring the bell, Mr. Furey," he said. "You hurt these people. You hurt them badly. You can't make it up to them.

"Restitution is a feeble attempt to do so."

Furey, who owned the now-defunct Toohey Brothers Funeral Home in Newburgh, pleaded guilty May 2 to three counts of felony third-degree grand larceny. He admitted he took money from three elderly people in exchange for future funeral services. He also admitted he wrote a bad check that left another funeral director on the hook for more than \$8,000. Furey also agreed to pay \$32,019 in restitution.

Furey is on probation in Florida for stealing more than \$16,000 from a Niceville, Fla., funeral home where he was manager.

In 1999, Eaudne Lawson, now 86, gave Furey \$7,200 for a funeral. Furey closed up shop and moved to Florida without telling Lawson's family or any of the other victims.

Yesterday, Barbara Clancy, the girlfriend of Lawson's son, Glenn, said she was "thrilled" that Furey was going to prison.

"It shows that the system works," she said. "It wasn't a violent crime, but it's the same as if he went up to her on the street, put a knife to her and stole her pocketbook."

Furey, 56, called himself a "devout Catholic" and Vietnam veteran who had lived an honorable life until he ran into financial problems.

"It was a horrible mistake in judgment, and I am truly sorry."

Assistant District Attorney Robert Ostrov said the case was not about how much money Furey stole; it was about the elderly people whom Furey preyed upon.

"That makes this case so heinous," he said, "so reprehensible."

Goshen

Driver who left fatal accident found guilty

A Montgomery motorist who was found guilty Tuesday of leaving the scene of a fatal accident could face four years in prison for her crime.

After two hours of deliberations, an Orange County jury found Sandra J. Sibley, 36, guilty of failing to report an accident that left a pedestrian, 63-year-old Anna G. Rodriguez, dead.

Sibley was driving on Route 211, heading toward Middletown, shortly after 11 p.m. on July 20 when Rodriguez walked in front of the car.

Instead of stopping, Sibley kept driving, picked up her young daughter at the Orange County Fair and went home. Then she called police – 47 minutes after hitting Rodriguez.

Robert Ostrov, the assistant district attorney who prosecuted the case in front of Judge Nicholas DeRosa, said most of the trial revolved around whether Sibley filled her legal obligation to report an accident.

John Ingrassia, Sibley's lawyer, contended that although there was a delay, Sibley still called police. Ostrov said the law states that a driver must report an accident immediately, not 47 minutes later. Ingrassia, was not available for comment yesterday. Ostrov said his office would recommend at Sibley's upcoming sentencing that she spend one-and-a-third to four years in prison.

"Not once did she express the slightest concern for the person she hit," Ostrov said.

Jessica Gardner

October 24, 2003

Lawyer's a cheat, clients tell court

By Wayne A. Hall
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Goshen – Cornwall-on-Hudson lawyer Michelle Okin rolled in hand trolley loads of documents yesterday to defend herself against charges in Orange County Court that she bilked clients out of more than \$50,000.

A county grand jury charged Okin April 17 with multiple counts of felony grand theft and scheme to defraud. Witnesses, mostly older people who met Okin through her free estate planning seminars, testified that she took fees of varying amounts – one woman said Okin took her for \$23,000 – without performing promised work in 2001 and 2002.

The witnesses tell similar stories: Okin for months ducked phone calls, faxes and when reached, refused to return their money.

"That's why I kept calling her," said Alfredo DeCastro, 60, of Port Jervis. "No work was done." When he finally got her, Okin told him "she'd been sick and said she couldn't return my money." He paid her \$1,900 for an estate plan for his father, including a trust.

Okin, 43, has declined to comment until the trial is over. But her lawyer, John Ingrassia, laid out a defense in a court: He basically said the so-called victims didn't know if Okin intended to finish their legal work, and in some cases had not been able to recall documents they actually did sign that showed she was in fact working on their behalf.

But Assistant District Attorney Robert Ostrov insisted Okin stole the money systematically with intent to cheat the clients. He promised to prove that from documentation, including cash-ed checks, as well as witnesses.

She faces a prison sentence, disbarment, fines and restitution, if found guilty in the non-jury trial, which started this week before Orange County Court Judge Jeffrey Berry and is expected to continue today.