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Chris Whidby

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'SMOOTH TALKER' GETS CASH, CARS -- AND JAIL//LEAVES TRAIL OF SCAMS AND BROKEN TRUST

Businessman. Swindler. Christian. Thief.

Chris Whidby has been all those things to his victims in a three-year tear through the Twin Cities, investigators and prosecutors say.

The Woodbury resident pleaded guilty in Hennepin County last week to three counts of theft by swindle -- cases in which he conned victims into buying expensive cars or opening credit card accounts for his use.

A judge is expected to sentence Whidby in September to just over three years in prison.

That case, another Hennepin County conviction and more in Washington County and Wisconsin's St. Croix County show at least seven victims lost more than \$300,000 to Whidby.

It won't be the first time he's been sentenced to prison, and the Hennepin County cases may not be the last: Authorities are investigating more fraud allegations in Washington County. "It's not over for him yet," said Washington County Sheriff's Commander Pat Olson.

Whidby declined to discuss his convictions in detail, but he said: "I'm in sort of a tough spot. I'll be held responsible for this." Whidby pointed out that his businesses are still operating and he plans to wrap up family affairs before he is sentenced.

"I don't have anything to say," he said. "It is what it is."

Whidby was a mortgage broker, and many of his customers were working-class couples who had a hard time finding financing for a new home.

He came across to them in two ways.

In a July 2005 ad in Woodbury Magazine, Whidby was businesslike, sitting in an executive chair, wearing a striped dress shirt and sweater vest, holding eyeglasses as if he'd just taken them off.

Yet, at times, he would meet clients in what one called a "clean gangster" look -- baggy pants, pinkie rings, chains and expensive earrings.

"He wanted to appear like he had money. But he didn't believe in suits. The people he was closing loans for were people who had bad credit. He didn't want to dress above them," said former employee Sharyn Coleman.

He also hid his past. According to Minnesota Department of Corrections records, Whidby was sentenced to prison for three years for assaulting a woman in 1994. In that

case, Ramsey County prosecutors charged him with third-degree criminal sexual conduct over allegations he put a gun to a woman's head and forced her to perform oral sex. He pleaded guilty to an amended charge of second-degree assault.

A study of criminal complaints filed in Washington, Hennepin and St. Croix counties shows a pattern in Whidby's financial crimes.

He has done business under a number of company names -- such as W Holdings & Investment, Vanderbilt Federal Mortgage, American Home Funding -- from offices in cities including Lake Elmo, Oakdale and Baldwin, Wis.

He didn't scam strangers. He focused on women he knew: his employees, his acquaintances -- even his mother-in-law.

He began by winning their trust or giving them positions of responsibility in his brokerage. Within weeks, he asked them to help him out by opening credit card accounts for the company -- in their names -- or signing documents for the purchase of a car, according to the charges.

He always said he was the one liable for the debt. He assured them he was taking care of payments when bills turned up overdue. He even became indignant when others questioned why unpaid bills were piling up, investigators and prosecutors say.

And then he stiffed them.

"When he reaches his money limit with people, he bails," said 43-year-old Mike Carey, a Lake Elmo businessman. Carey and his business partner won \$10,000 in claims in March 2006 against Whidby after the broker didn't pay his bills.

Through his scams, complaints stated, Whidby bought jewelry, computers and several cars, including a Mercedes, a Cadillac Escalade and a Hummer.

All along, he exuded confidence and talked big to employees and business associates. Once he even told an employee his company would land him on the cover of Newsweek.

"He definitely was a smooth talker," said Crystal Caban, a client who took Whidby to court over a \$830 bounced check. "He knew what to tell us."

In Coleman's case, he appealed to her religious nature. While she worked for him for 10 weeks starting December 2004, she said, he seemed sincere and "God-loving," and handed out business cards with the expression "God, Family, Country, Clients."

But he was convicted in Washington County District Court in April 2006 of conning Coleman out of \$70,000 by reneging on a loan and running up personal expenses on credit card accounts she'd opened in her name for the business.

Coleman's case was just one of more than a half-dozen fraud-related convictions between 2003 and 2005.

In the case resolved in Hennepin County last week, prosecutors said that in March 2005, Whidby took one of his loan officers to a Minnetonka car dealership under the pretense of buying himself a \$57,000 Mercedes-Benz, according to the complaint.

At the dealership, Whidby and a dealer employee presented the woman with paperwork for her signature. She wasn't able to read the documents, but feeling "shocked and intimidated," she signed the paperwork anyway.

Whidby drove away in the Mercedes, leaving her to drive home alone. On the way back, the complaint stated, the woman "realized that she had, effectively, just purchased a car."

When she complained the next day, he fired her.

That allegation against him was dropped as a part of Whidby's plea bargain.

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