

Former Round Rock-based NASCAR owner arrested

Angela Harkness surrenders to authorities in New York after three years on the run.



By Steven Kreytak
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The woman called the U.S. Marshal Service office in Austin a week and a half ago and asked for Hector Gomez, the deputy whose name she knew from reading news reports about herself.

It was Fatemeh Angela Harkness, 30, a former Yellow Rose stripper who pleaded guilty in 2004 to conspiring with an Austin banker to embezzle \$1 million to start a NASCAR auto racing team. Before sentencing, she fled to Mexico and then to the United Arab Emirates, where she lived for two years beyond the reach of U.S. authorities.

"She said that she was ready to come home," Gomez said, "that she was tired of running."

After a series of phone conversations, Gomez arranged for Harkness to board a flight from Abu Dhabi to New York over the weekend. U.S. marshals arrested her when she landed at New York's JFK International Airport with her 6-year-old daughter.

Soon, Harkness will be flown to Austin, where U.S. District Judge Sam Sparks will sentence her. She could get five years in prison.

"She was very down . . . wore out," Gomez said. "She was more wore out by being away from family than she was of trying to beat this case."

Harkness' arrest is the latest turn in a remarkable story chronicled in the Austin American-Statesman and later in Car and Driver and Maxim magazines.

She was born Fatemeh Karimkhani in Iran, raised in Germany and moved to Central Texas — where she still has family — in the mid-1990s. She left for a time for California, where she had a stormy marriage to a judge, who later committed suicide.

She returned to Central Texas and found work at the Yellow Rose cabaret on North Lamar Boulevard. There she met Gary D. Jones, 39, a former Wells Fargo business banker.

It is unclear how they hatched their plan, but out of nowhere in 2002, the pair emerged on the NASCAR scene with a team called Angela's Motorsports, run out of Harkness' Round Rock home. They recruited sponsors and accomplished driver Mike McLaughlin and entered cars in the Busch Series, a second-tier racing circuit.

A team run by a woman and an African American man was welcomed by a NASCAR establishment looking to diversify its sport. But days before the 2003 season was to open at Daytona International Speedway in Florida, the team's checks began to bounce, and Angela's Motorsports disappeared as fast as it formed.

The FBI began investigating, and Harkness quickly agreed to plead guilty and testify against Jones if necessary. In January 2004, she pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit bank fraud and was allowed to remain free on bail.

Jones was charged in February 2004 with fraud, theft and embezzlement. He would later admit using his job at the bank to prepare about 12 loans using several people's names, including his sister's, and then keeping the money and using it to fund Angela's Motorsports, among other things.

Harkness skipped town weeks before her May 2004 sentencing and was declared a fugitive.

Jones was sentenced that year to three years and 10 months in prison. The Bureau of Prisons estimates that he'll be released in June.

U.S. marshals in Austin tracked Harkness to Dubai, in part by searching the garbage left in front of her sister's Round Rock home. They found a fax that indicated Harkness was living in Dubai and seeking work as a beautician.

Authorities in the Persian Gulf emirate arrested Harkness in 2005 but quickly released her. The United States has no extradition treaty with the United Arab Emirates.

Gomez said the call from Harkness came out of the blue, and at first he didn't believe it was her. He tested her, asking her the names of her family members and a bit of her history.

During several later conversations, Harkness told Gomez that authorities in the United Arab Emirates had seized her passport so she couldn't leave, Gomez said. And Harkness told Gomez that she wanted her daughter to be able to see their family in the United States.

"I told her that she was a young woman, that she had a lot of life ahead of her," Gomez said, adding that he made no promises to Harkness for favorable treatment.

When Harkness arrived in New York, her sister picked up Harkness' daughter, Gomez said.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Mark Lane said prosecutors will wait for Harkness to be sentenced before deciding whether to file additional charges relating to her flight from the country.

"The bottom line is," Lane said, "she's facing up to five years in the federal penitentiary."

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