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Rex Judd: On the run - or murdered?

Wayne County man vanished while on trip to Thailand in 2005.

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ZOOM

Rex Judd, a 51-year-old Wayne County man, disappeared more than two years ago while on a business trip to Thailand.

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On Sept. 14, 2005, Rex Judd's wife dropped him off at the Greater Rochester International Airport.

From there, Judd flew to New York City, then on to Bangkok, Thailand.

The very next day, in the Thai city of Pattaya, he disappeared.

Judd, 51, a Wayne County millionaire who dealt in get-rich-quick schemes, lived with his wife, Lori, on a lakefront estate in the town of Ontario. He apparently hasn't been seen or heard from since that 2005 trip to Thailand.

Today, his disappearance is at the center of a sweeping international probe into extortion, passport fraud and, ultimately, questions about Judd's fate.

Interviews with Judd's friends and business associates, some of whom have been interviewed by the FBI, plus a review of court documents, reveal that there are two conflicting theories about what happened to Judd.

In one version, Judd used fake passports to go underground, where he has molded an entirely new existence for himself and is living in some exotic locale.

In the other version, Judd angered some of his business partners and paid with his life.

In recent months, some details of the probe have emerged from court documents in federal criminal cases in Utah.

Federal prosecutors in Salt Lake City are pursuing criminal charges against Egor Chernov, a Russian citizen living near that city who is accused of dealing in fake passports. Gregory Coleman, an FBI special agent involved in the case, wrote in an affidavit that he was investigating whether a man "was murdered at the direction of Chernov" shortly after arriving in Thailand in September 2005.

The apparent victim is not named in the affidavit. But other statements in the FBI affidavit, coupled with court documents filed in a separate Utah case involving Chernov, leave little doubt that the possible homicide victim is Rex Judd.

In fact, a Florida man, Paul Combs, is accused of spraypainting on Chernov's home in Lehi, Utah, "Egor Chernov murdered Rex Judd! Russian maggot!"

Chernov, Judd and Combs were part of a small group of men, at least some of them quite wealthy, who did business together and socialized in places such as Thailand, Moscow and the Bahamas.

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Combs, who is facing federal charges of extortion in Utah in relation to that vandalism incident, is central to the mystery. Los Angeles lawyer Jerome Mooney, who is defending Chernov on the passport fraud charges, said Combs apparently is the one who has told authorities that Chernov is linked to Judd's disappearance.

Mooney said he does not think Combs is a reliable witness. Mooney denied that Chernov is responsible for Judd's disappearance.

Both Chernov and Combs are being held without bail in Utah awaiting trial.

Given the unusual cast of characters involved in the case, authorities could easily dismiss the story about Judd's disappearance as a flight of fancy. However, the passport fraud case against Chernov, while being prosecuted in Utah, is being handled in part by organized crime and racketeering prosecutors out of the Washington, D.C., office of the Justice Department. And one of those prosecutors specializes in cases involving Russian organized crime.

One federal court document describes the probe as "a long-term and ongoing investigation" conducted by the Justice Department, the FBI, the State Department and the Diplomatic Security Service.

Justice Department officials refused to comment about the investigation.

When Judd was first reported missing, a Thai Web site that provides information about missing people said there was a \$100,000 reward for information about Judd's disappearance. Web site operators said they no longer have contact information for the source of the reward but they think it was Judd's family and friends.

Steve Bailey, a Utah resident who said he knows Chernov and Judd well, said he finds "ludicrous" the notion that Chernov ordered Judd's murder.

"Egor Chernov is a nonconfrontational, soft-spoken person, and Rex is close to his best friend," said Bailey, who said he has been interviewed several times by the FBI and thinks it likely that Judd vanished of his own volition.

Charlie Flynn, a Canadian who knew Judd, also traveled to Thailand in 2005 as a prospective business partner of Chernov's. Reached at his home in Vancouver last week, Flynn claimed that Combs and others told him in conversations in 2006 that Judd was slain and dumped in the ocean off Thailand — allegations that were also shared with the FBI, according to court papers. Flynn also claims that some of the same individuals once tried to drug and kill him, but he was able to escape Thailand.

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In court papers, Chernov maintained that the claims of his involvement in murder attempts were "ludicrous allegations."

Flynn said he had been interviewed at length by the FBI and testified this summer before a federal grand jury in Utah.

"Much of that (testimony) was about Rex Judd," Flynn said.

Visions of 'Pud'

Judd grew up in Wayne County and graduated in 1974 from Wayne Central High School. His senior-class yearbook cites his nickname as "Pud," and his ambition: "to be a professional hitchhiker and part-time soccer player." Scott Vanderweel, a Wayne County man who said he grew up with Judd, described Judd as a "great guy" who was generous and had a keen sense of humor.

Vanderweel, who court papers reveal knows Chernov and Combs, declined to answer questions about his friend's disappearance. "There is an investigation going on and I was asked to really not comment on it," Vanderweel said last week.

A brief biography included in a 2003 filing with the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission indicated that Judd had been a marketing consultant for several companies. He was also an adjunct professor at St. John Fisher College in 1991, said college spokeswoman Anne Geer.

And Judd was president of Lorex Associates, a realty firm based on East Main Street in Rochester. The company was incorporated in 1985 and did business into the early 1990s.

But by the mid-1990s, Judd was involved in another profession: marketing get-rich-quick techniques to the public.

The company that Judd and two other local men founded in 1996, Visions Group of America, held seminars in meeting rooms around the country at which kits were sold that described how to make money working at home. The money-making tactics included trading in grocery coupons and selling ads on the Internet. The kits typically cost several hundred dollars each, but buyers were told they could make thousands of dollars in a few days' time.

For a time, Visions Group was very successful. The company grossed \$2.7 million in the first three months of 1997 alone, according to documents filed in a lawsuit involving Visions Group.

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But by mid-1997, the company was in trouble with Fleet Bank, which said too many customers were demanding their money back. And in 2000, the Federal Trade Commission accused Visions Group and an allied company, SOHO Technologies Inc., of making false promises of riches to buyers and failing to properly inform them of refund procedures.

In a consent order announced in October 2000, Judd and his two colleagues agreed to pay a \$22,000 fine and to refrain from making exaggerated promises to customers.

'The best pitchman'

Bailey said Judd and Vanderweel also were involved with National Grants Conferences, a company that sells tips on how to reap riches by obtaining government grants.

Publicly available corporate records do not list Judd as an officer of that company, though the firm's Web site says it has offices here. Vanderweel is featured in a 1998 story about the company in the online magazine *Salon*.

"Rex would come on and speak for two or three hours on how you can get free money," said Bailey, who once heard Judd give his spiel before hundreds of people in a New Orleans ballroom. "He was the best pitchman I'd ever seen in my life."

Bailey said Judd once told him he made \$2.5 million to \$3 million a year in the business.

Bailey, Judd and Chernov met one another about eight years ago, when they came together to talk about investing in a company that wanted to market magnesium bicycle frames. Bailey said Chernov and Judd quickly became "fast friends."

When Judd traveled to Thailand in September 2005, his goal apparently was to discuss a potentially lucrative investment in Russian real estate that was being promoted by Chernov, according to court documents.

Chernov is or was principal in at least a dozen U.S. corporations. He owns a villa in Pattaya, a seaside city known as a center of Thailand's infamous sex trade, where Judd, Flynn, Combs and others would vacation.

After Judd failed to return from Thailand in September 2005, his wife filed a missing person's report with the New York State Police. She also reported him missing to federal authorities. A spokesman for the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok said last week that they were aware of the case but couldn't comment.

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Lori Judd could not be located for comment.

The couple's property on Lake Road in the town of Ontario — which has a 4,600-square-foot home with five bedrooms, nine acres and 260 feet of Lake Ontario beachfront — has been listed for sale for \$695,000. A spokesman for the firm handling the property, Hunt Real Estate ERA Columbus Division in Pittsford, said Tuesday that a sale was pending.

Three weeks after Judd was last seen in Pattaya, his wife met with Chernov in Chicago, according to the FBI affidavit. The Russian attempted to convince her that her husband had vanished of his own volition.

That possibility has not been ruled out. Lori Judd told the FBI that Rex had been facing federal criminal tax charges in 2003 and told her that if the situation got too bad, they could get fake Russian passports from Chernov and "disappear."

Rochester lawyer David Rothenberg, who represented Judd in the tax matter, said it was resolved civilly with no charges filed. But Chernov has told the FBI that he did provide a fake Russian passport to Judd.

FBI agents have a darker version of events. According to the FBI affidavit, an informant told the investigators that Judd was killed the day he arrived in Pattaya and his body dumped at sea.

An informant told the FBI that Chernov arranged for the slaying, according to an FBI affidavit.

As evidence of the alleged foul play, an FBI agent met with Lori Judd in January and showed her a photograph of personal effects that supposedly had been stripped from Rex's body.

Among the effects, which the informant shared with the FBI, was a gold wedding band with inset diamonds.

According to the affidavit, Lori Judd began to weep when she saw the photograph.

The band, she told agents, was the one she had given her husband just a few years earlier.

GCRAIG@DemocratandChronicle.com

SORR@DemocratandChronicle.com

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