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**D.A. BROWN: 20-YEAR-OLD FEMALE CHARGED WITH STEALING OVER \$800,000
FROM ELDERLY HOWARD BEACH MAN IN "SWEETHEART" SCAM**

Allegedly Attempted To Steal Additional \$5,000 From Another Elderly Man Before Being Apprehended

Queens District Attorney Richard A. Brown announced today that a 20-year-old Flushing woman has been charged under New York State's hate crime statute with stealing hundreds of thousands of dollars from an 85-year-old man by falsely claiming to need the money to pay medical bills and to help start up a business and for investments. As part of her scheme, the defendant allegedly re-financed the mortgage on the victim's Howard Beach home by fraudulently obtaining power of attorney over his finances.

The District Attorney said the defendant was arrested earlier this week when she allegedly attempted to dupe another elderly Queens man out of thousands of dollars by claiming to have cancer and needing money to pay medical expenses.

District Attorney Brown said, "In typical sweetheart swindler fashion, the defendant is accused of befriending elderly men and preying on their loneliness and vulnerability to scam them out of their life savings. Crimes involving the financial exploitation of the elderly – particularly those involving so-called sweetheart scams – are among the most devastating forms of elder abuse. Unfortunately, as America steadily grays, we are seeing such crimes occurring with more and more frequency."

The District Attorney identified the defendant as Natasha Munchkin Marks, 20, no known address, who allegedly used several aliases – including Crystal Smith, Sandy and Christina Hilton, no known employment. The defendant has been charged with two counts of Grand Larceny in the Second Degree as a Hate Crime, two counts of Grand Larceny in the Second Degree, Criminal Possession of Stolen Property in the Second Degree, Attempted Grand Larceny in the Third Degree as a Hate Crime, Grand Larceny in the Third Degree, two counts of Criminal Possession of a Forged Instrument in the Second Degree, Falsifying Business Records in the First Degree, Offering a False Instrument For Filing in the First Degree and Scheme To Defraud in the First Degree. She faces up to 15 years in prison if convicted.

Under the provisions of New York State's Hate Crimes Act of 2000, enhanced charges can be filed when a defendant commits a larceny and selects his or her victim because of their age which is defined as being 60 years of age or older.

District Attorney Brown said the investigation began on September 15, 2006, when a family member and a neighbor of the 85-year-old victim reported to authorities that the man was being financially exploited by a woman known only as "Sandy." In interviewing the victim, the District Attorney's Elder Fraud Unit learned that the defendant had befriended him in a supermarket and that during conversations in person and on the telephone she told him numerous hard luck tales.

The District Attorney said that the criminal complaint charges that, between February 24, 2006 and June 17, 2006, the defendant had requested 85-year-old Louis Bruno to provide her with hundreds of thousands of dollars for various expenses – such as hospital bills, doctor bills, start-up money for a business and for investments. As part of her scheme, it is alleged that the defendant had instructed the victim how to write the checks and had obtained numerous checks payable to one of her aliases, "Crystal Smith." The defendant allegedly told the victim that "Crystal" was a friend who would cash the checks which totaled \$164,000. The defendant allegedly had the victim write out other checks, totaling \$85,000, payable to "East West Restoration" – a company allegedly owned by a friend of the defendant's deceased mother. The defendant then allegedly endorsed the checks and cashed them at several different check cashing locations.

According to the District Attorney, it is additionally alleged that the defendant, between August 15, 2006 and September 6, 2006 and without Mr. Bruno's knowledge or permission, filed with the New York

City Department of Finance's Office of City Register as his Power of Attorney – using the name Crystal Smith – in order to conduct banking and real estate transactions on his behalf. Thereafter, the defendant, again without Mr. Bruno's permission and knowledge, allegedly re-financed the mortgage on his Howard Beach home and withdrew \$560,000 in equity from the property. At the mortgage closing on August 22, 2006, the defendant appeared as Mr. Bruno's power of attorney and presented a fraudulent social security card and Illinois driver's license bearing the name of Crystal Smith. A week later, on August 29th, the mortgage funds were deposited into an account belonging to Mr. Bruno and the defendant allegedly then repeatedly called Mr. Bruno, instructing him to go to the bank and take out the money.

Finally, the criminal complaint charges that, in September 2006, the defendant approached and befriended another elderly man, Julius Rosenberg, 79, of Jamaica, at a Staples store and, using the phony name, "Christina Hilton," stated that she had cancer and needed to be hospitalized, and requested money to pay for her medical expenses. On October 3, 2006, the defendant phoned Mr. Rosenberg and said she was coming back to New York and instructed him to go the bank, withdraw \$5,000 and meet her the following day in front of the Staples store at 209-34 Northern Boulevard in Bayside to give her the money.

When the defendant approached Mr. Rosenberg yesterday, detectives of the District Attorney's Detective Squad arrested her. She was arraigned yesterday before Queens Criminal Court Judge Robert M. Raciti who ordered the defendant held on \$500,000 bond or \$250,00 cash bail and set a return date of October 19, 2006.

District Attorney Brown established the Elder Fraud Unit to specifically address the concerns of financial exploitation of the elderly. Through the United States Department of Justice, the District Attorney Office obtained a grant sponsored by Senator Hillary Clinton to combat financial exploitation more effectively. The Elder Fraud Unit utilizes a three-prong approach – a dedicated prosecution unit, specialized support services to address the social service needs of senior victims and, thirdly, community outreach to both raise public awareness and help seniors better protect themselves from the various types of financial scams and to familiarize them with the services available to them, along with training for professionals and community groups in elder abuse detection, assessment and prevention.

District Attorney Brown noted that the investigation leading to today's charges is continuing and any individuals who feel that they have been victimized by the defendant are asked to call the Elder Fraud Unit at 718-286-6513.

The investigation was conducted by Detectives Evelyn Alegre, Richard Lewis and Jerome Pugh of the District Attorney's Detective Squad under the supervision of Lieutenant Robert Burke and Sergeant John Kenna and the overall supervision of Chief Lawrence J. Festa and Deputy Chief Al D. Velardi and Forensic Accountant Emory Nemeth of the District Attorney's Economic Crimes Bureau.

Assistant District Attorney Kristen A. Kane, Chief of the Elder Fraud Unit of District Attorney Brown's Economic Crimes Bureau, is investigating and prosecuting the case under the supervision of Assistant District Attorney Gregory C. Pavlides, Bureau Chief, and Christina Hanophy, Deputy Bureau Chief, and the overall supervision of Executive Assistant District Attorney for Investigations Peter A. Crusco and Deputy Executive Assistant District Attorney for Investigations Linda M. Cantoni.

It should be noted that criminal charges are merely an accusation and that a defendant is presumed innocent until proven guilty.

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Note to Editors: E-version of press release posted at www.queensda.org