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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**  
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**SOUTH OZONE PARK COUPLE PLEAD GUILTY IN DEED FRAUD SCHEME TO STEAL HOMES**  
**IN SOUTHEAST QUEENS**

*Two Homes Sold to New Owners with One Torn Down*

Queens District Attorney Melinda Katz announced that Justin Joseph pleaded guilty to a deed fraud scheme that resulted in five properties being stolen from their rightful owners. His wife, Latoya Hewitt, pleaded guilty in connection with the theft of one of the homes. As part of the plea, Joseph and Hewitt agreed to pay restitution for homes that were sold to others, including one that was demolished unbeknownst to its owner.

District Attorney Katz said: “No one should think they will get away with stealing the most valuable asset most people ever work to attain. My Housing and Worker Protection Bureau focuses on safeguarding homeowners from predatory real estate scams. Thank you to our partners at the New York City Sheriff’s Office for their work on this case.”

New York City Sheriff Anthony Miranda said: “Preventing and prosecuting deed theft continues to be a priority of Mayor Adam’s Administration and the Sheriff’s office. We are pleased to announce that collaboration between the New York City Sheriff’s Office and the Queens District Attorney’s Office has resulted in two arrests for the theft of Queens properties. We will continue to combat deed fraud and collaborate with our partners in all agencies to bring justice to those criminals victimizing the elderly and families from our communities.”

Joseph, 45, of 132<sup>nd</sup> Street in South Ozone Park, pleaded guilty before Supreme Court Justice Leigh K. Cheng to scheme to defraud in the first degree and three counts of offering a false instrument for filing in the first degree.

Joseph is expected to be sentenced to one to three years in prison on June 18. He also agreed to void the deeds to five properties and make restitution of \$335,256.76, proceeds he received from the fraudulent sale of two of the homes.

Hewitt, 49, of 132<sup>nd</sup> Street in South Ozone Park, pleaded guilty to offering a false instrument for filing in the second degree. She is expected to be sentenced to a one-year conditional discharge after agreeing to void the deed and make restitution of \$48,751.48.

The couple were arrested on April 12 following a long-term investigation into the deed fraud by the Queens District Attorney’s Housing & Worker Protection Bureau.

The District Attorney's office will file a motion to apply a state statute and restore the deeds for five properties to their rightful owners, sparing the victims the time and expense of additional legal proceedings in civil court.

According to the charges and plea agreements:

- On March 25, 2019, Joseph and Hewitt filed a false document with the New York City Department of Finance recording a deed transfer of a home on Pinegrove Street in Jamaica from a 78-year-old woman, who was its rightful owner, to Hewitt.
- The deed included the seal of a notary public who denied that it was his signature on the document and that the seal was authentic.
- Hewitt, while acting in concert with her husband, proceeded to sell the home. She obtained a forged death certificate to facilitate the transaction.
- The property sold in November 2019 for \$315,000. She received a check for proceeds of \$48,751.48 and her husband and his mother received a check for \$40,000 each.
- In September 2019, Joseph filed a false deed transferring property on 181<sup>st</sup> Street in Springfield Gardens to himself. He forged the signature of the rightful owner, who lived elsewhere.
- In November 2019, he sold the home for \$355,000. Joseph received a check for \$255,256.76.
- The home was later demolished, which the rightful owner discovered when she drove by the property. A new home was built in its place.
- In December 2019, Joseph submitted a false deed to the city to transfer property on 155<sup>th</sup> Street in Jamaica to himself. He falsely represented that he bought the property for \$50,000.
- In March 2020, Joseph submitted a fraudulent deed transfer to the city and forged the signature of the rightful owner of a property on 207<sup>th</sup> Street in Queens Village.
- In April 2020, Joseph submitted a deed transfer to the city for a property on 131<sup>st</sup> Street in South Ozone Park. He forged the real owner's signature and created a fake identify for himself.

The investigation was conducted by Assistant District Attorneys Christina Hanophy and Rachel Stein of the Queens District Attorney's Housing & Worker Protection Bureau assisted by Detective Kevin Acon of the New York City Sheriff's Office under the supervision of the New York City Department of Finance.

Assistant District Attorney Rachel Stein, Deputy Chief of the Housing and Worker Protection Bureau, and Assistant District Attorney Christina Hanophy, Senior Deputy Chief, are prosecuting the case under the supervision of Assistant District Attorney William Jorgenson, Bureau Chief, and under the overall supervision of Executive Assistant District Attorney for Investigations Gerard A. Brave.

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