

Man guilty in bike theft case

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In exchange for a mere \$40, Jean Laveau stole a bicycle for Igor Kenk and was in the process of pinching another on July 16 when police swooped in to arrest the two men, a Toronto court found yesterday as Mr. Laveau pleaded guilty to a pair of criminal charges.

The 47-year-old's convictions for theft under \$5,000 and possession of burglary tools were just the latest additions to a record of low-level crime Mr. Laveau has developed since his once-stable working life drifted to the margins because of chronic depression, court heard.

While Mr. Justice Brent Knazanof the Ontario Court stressed that Mr. Kenk, the second-hand dealer from whom police later seized more than 2,700 bikes, has yet to be tried on charges from that night and dozens more laid since, he accepted the Crown's contention – and Mr. Laveau's admission – that Mr. Kenk gave Mr. Laveau a set of bolt-cutters and sent him to steal two bicycles near Queen Street West and Strachan Avenue while police looked on.

Thus began an extensive police investigation that uncovered hundreds of used bikes Mr. Kenk had stashed at a dozen locations, and has so far produced 58 charges against Mr. Kenk, most related to possession of drugs and stolen bicycles. The probe also unleashed a storm of media coverage as it became a lightning rod for aggrieved cyclists in a theft-prone city, more than 300 of whom have since reclaimed their lost bikes from among those seized from Mr. Kenk's Queen Street West shop, his Yorkville home and the back-alley garages he rented around the west end.

Although Mr. Kenk secured release on bail a week ago, Mr. Laveau, by comparison a bit player who faced far fewer counts, has languished in the Don Jail since his arrest. In addition to the 23 days he had spent there before pleading guilty, he was sentenced to a further 14 days upon conviction yesterday.

Outside court, Mr. Laveau's lawyer, Mitch Engel, said "it's never a great time" to be in the Don, an old and notoriously crowded jail two kilometres west of the Gerrard Street East rooming house that Mr. Laveau most recently called home.

That's a considerable drop from the life he had built for himself in his former home of Montreal, where his family settled after immigrating from Papua New Guinea in the late 1960s, when he was 7.

In 1984, in his early 20s, Mr. Laveau joined the army and was stationed at Canadian Forces Base Valcartier in Quebec. In 10 years as a supply technician and chief cook, he spent time overseas, which strained his relationship with his common-law wife, Mr. Engel told the court.

After he left the military, Mr. Laveau enrolled at Montreal's McGill University, and in 1998, graduated with a bachelor's degree in electromechanical engineering. A year later, he and his wife separated, and Mr. Laveau took a job as an aircraft mechanic, Mr. Engel said.

In 2001, he left his job and was diagnosed with chronic depression. He moved to Toronto four

years ago and has rented modest rooms ever since, while living on disability benefits.

While Judge Knazan heeded the Crown's call for a 14-day sentence, he told Mr. Laveau he was lucky he didn't get several months, given prior convictions and the fact that "he's using the skills he learned in the army and as a mechanic" to steal from others.

"People who use bicycles sometimes don't have much money themselves, and rely on bicycles for transportation," the judge said.