

# 12-year prison term in mortgage swindle

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A Maryland woman who stole millions from Washington area homeowners trying to avoid foreclosure is a "vulture" whose case should serve as a warning to other con artists, a federal judge said yesterday before imposing a sentence of more than 12 years.

Joy Jackson, 41, a former exotic dancer who became president of the Metropolitan Money Store, carried out the years-long scheme through the Lanham-based business. She used the cash to buy jewelry, fur coats and vacations, and to cover a lavish wedding at the Mayflower Hotel, where Patti LaBelle serenaded guests who feasted on lobster and drank Cristal.

Metropolitan, which advertised on gospel and R&B stations, promised to help people keep their homes and repair their credit. Instead, Jackson and several co-conspirators, including her husband, Kurt Fordham, took titles to properties and drained them of equity.

The case produced more courtroom drama Monday when Assistant U.S. Attorney James A. Crowell IV was punched in the face by a relative of Jackson's key accomplice, Jennifer McCall, witnesses said.

McCall was in court to be sentenced at a separate hearing later in the day, but the hearing was postponed after she fired her lawyers. After Crowell, who had prosecuted former congressman Robert W. Ney (R-Ohio), asked that she be jailed pending sentencing, one of her relatives leapt into the well of the courtroom and punched him. The man was taken into custody, officials said.

Prosecutors said they have found 117 victims in the scam, but hundreds more have been identified in a related civil lawsuit.

"This was a scheme that was practiced on the most vulnerable people you would imagine," U.S. District Judge Roger W. Titus said.

The company directed owners to transfer title of their homes to third-party buyers for a year. During that time, Metropolitan said it would borrow against the value of the home and use that money to pay the mortgage and repair homeowners' credit ratings. It also promised to help owners obtain better interest rates.

Instead, Metropolitan siphoned off the equity and Jackson and others spent the cash. The company also stopped making mortgage payments on the houses.

Titus, who sentenced Jackson to 12 years and seven months in prison and ordered her to pay more than \$16 million in restitution, called mortgage fraud "a fever that seems to be spreading around the country."

"A sentence in this case is going to be noticed by those out there who think of doing this kind of behavior," the judge said.

Jackson, who wore a green jumpsuit with "prisoner" printed across the back, wept during a long apology to a courtroom full of her victims. She said she "did not know a lot of things" and "allowed things to go on."

"I opened the company out of true love. I opened the company to help," Jackson said. "I know I have good in me, but I allowed greed to overcome me."

Prosecutors said Jackson and her co-conspirators left a trail of devastated homeowners in Maryland, Virginia and the District who thought they were digging out of financial problems, only to find they had been cheated. One woman lost the home her great-grandmother had purchased years earlier, according to court records. A man who was the first in his family to own a home said he was swindled by the company and is fighting to keep the house.

Margaret Neal, one of the victims, told the judge that her husband worked three jobs to keep their Annapolis home. After going to Metropolitan for help, they lost the home to foreclosure. The family ended up sleeping in a car and needing a food pantry.

"Joy Jackson Fordham took our American dream and turned it into a nightmare," Neal said. "Joy Jackson Fordham lived the life. Now my home is gone. There is no going back. Gone. Sold. Remodeled. You, Joy Jackson Fordham, did that to me."