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Drug scheme spells prison for couple

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By the time she was in her mid-20s, Alpine schoolteacher Janeen Beck was in a serious funk.

She was single and her prospects for love seemed bleak after breaking up with her boyfriend of three years over religious differences. According to her psychologist, Janeen was asking herself: "I am not married, what is wrong with me?"

Then the devout Mormon met Mario Roberto Hernandez, a fellow member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who was visiting Utah from Colombia, where Beck had served a church mission. Within weeks, they were engaged. The wedding took place six months later.

But marriage came with a price. Mario says his religious convictions waned almost immediately. A decade later, Janeen watched in anguish as her husband's affection for a female employee developed.

A year after that, in 1998, she helped him launder money for a Colombian drug cartel as a way, she said, to keep her marriage together.

Off and on over five years, Janeen and Mario, with three other Utahns, laundered \$5 million in cash from cocaine sales and earned a 10 percent commission, the U.S. Attorney's Office says. The Hernandezes lived in Sandy's affluent Hidden Oaks subdivision, where they indulged in new cars and fancy furniture. That all ended in 2002 when the FBI busted them in California.

Today, the Hernandezes say they have reclaimed their faith and rebuilt their lives -- but their future together is on hold due to impending prison sentences.

Asking for leniency: A court-appointed psychologist thinks Janeen's dependent personality, coupled with marital problems, took her from traditional Utah girl to money launderer. Janeen suffers from a "significant emotional disturbance" and what amounts to Battered Woman Syndrome, the psychologist says.

Where she goes from here could hinge on that analysis. Janeen, who pleaded guilty to three money laundering charges in U.S. District Court in Salt Lake City, argues that her mental state calls for a lighter term. Last month, Judge Dale Kimball sentenced Mario to more than seven years in prison.

Federal prosecutors are not buying Janeen's argument. They already have cut her a deal because of her cooperation that recommends a term of 5 1/2 years instead of the maximum 11 1/4 years and they object to an additional reduction.

They say the psychologist's evaluation fails to pinpoint any mental condition that would overcome Janeen's conservative, religious background. The judge has ordered a second evaluation.

"The connection between this criminal conduct and the defendant's reaction to marital infidelity or her attempts to save her marriage [to her co-defendant] are not clear from the psychological evaluation," assistant U.S. attorney Gregory Diamond wrote in court papers.

Janeen declined to talk to The Salt Lake Tribune, but did discuss her life and crime with Utah psychologist Linda Gummow for an evaluation in September as part of a presentencing report.

Wanting to Win: Now 44, Janeen had a typical Utah upbringing. The youngest of four children in a Mormon family, she graduated from American Fork High School in 1977 with high marks and in only three

years earned an elementary education degree from Brigham Young University, her mother's alma mater.

Janeen taught for the Alpine School District for 12 years, with an 18-month interruption to serve an LDS mission to Colombia beginning in mid-1983.

Despite her professional success and active spiritual life, Janeen went through periods of depression. In 1983, she broke up with her boyfriend because he wasn't Mormon.

Then, in December 1985, she met Mario, now 45, at church. They married when Janeen was 27.

Janeen was the primary breadwinner until Mario earned a degree in economics from the University of Utah. They lived in Sandy and attended church regularly at first, but Mario's unwillingness to pay the 10 percent tithing, which most Mormons do, made his wife uncomfortable. After the birth of the first of their two daughters, Mario stopped going to services and began drinking, a violation of church code.

Mario says he started to drift away from the LDS faith within a year of his marriage.

"I didn't fit the language and the culture," he said.

Said their former neighbor, Linda Colton: "She was active [in church] and she really struggled with the fact that he wasn't." In 1993, Janeen was heartened by her husband's new friendship with neighbor Tomas Martinez, a practicing Mormon and native of Spain. The two men set up an international loan business, and their early success allowed Janeen to quit and stay home with her girls.

When the loan business faltered, Mario started his own company importing dinnerware and began to travel frequently outside the United States. He drank more and, according to Janeen's psychological evaluation, had affairs during trips to Cuba. Mario told The Tribune he does not dispute the facts of the evaluation.

Mario also began criticizing Janeen's looks and telling her she was no fun. Janeen began drinking so her husband would take her to social functions, but stopped six months later.

In early 1996, Mario hired a woman named Robbie Burgess, who became a family friend. Janeen had Burgess watch the children when she was in Colombia for plastic surgery that included a breast reduction. In exchange, Janeen and Mario paid for Burgess' breast implants.

Soon after that, Janeen became suspicious of Mario's relationship with Burgess. The affair started in secret, but in March 1997, Mario and Burgess dropped the charade.

"She knew about it. We were in San Francisco and she said 'You know, I am just glad it is you, at least I know,' " Burgess told The Tribune.

Burgess said Mario, with Janeen's knowledge, bought her a car and paid for her apartment.

But Janeen described the relationship as less than cordial in her talk with Gummow. Burgess repeatedly told Janeen that Mario loved her and belonged to her. Mario said he couldn't choose between the two women.

The three traveled together in April 1997 to Spain. "This was embarrassing to Mrs. Hernandez, but she persisted. She did not want Ms. Burgess to 'win,' " the evaluation says.

Four months after the trip, Mario told Janeen the affair was over. He fired Burgess.

Drug Money: In the fall of 1997, Mario began meeting with Jairo Vanegas, a former LDS employee in Colombia then living in Draper. Martinez joined them in what Janeen thought were talks about dinnerware exports to Colombia. In the end, all four -- Martinez, Vanegas and the Hernandezes -- pleaded guilty to money laundering.

Also that fall, Burgess reappeared. Mario assured his wife the two were just talking, but Janeen wasn't sure.

By now, Janeen was aware Mario was picking up briefcases full of cash, but denied she knew his behavior was illegal. As an officer of their business, she was involved in some transactions, including wiring money.

In December 1997, Janeen accompanied her husband to New York City to pick up cash, which came from street sales of cocaine. She believed it was from an international loan. Two months later, Mario went on another money trip, this time to Panama and Colombia with Burgess.

Now fully aware that the transactions were illegal, Janeen went along anyway, even concealing cash in her coat, rationalizing that it was "not too bad," the evaluation says.

The first money-laundering trips coincided with a reversal of fortune for the Hernandezes. Michael and Emily Ayre moved in next door in early 1998 and saw their neighbors' Land Cruiser and hot tub being repossessed.

"From the get-go, we knew they had financial problems," Michael Ayre said.

The money woes seemed to stem from business problems and high living. The Hernandezes had a six-bedroom home assessed at almost \$334,000, according to property records. And neighbors saw new furniture and other items delivered regularly.

At a low point, Janeen said if she and Mario ever had money again, they would be more conservative, the Ayres said. They never were.

"They liked the nice life," Emily Ayre said.

The dinnerware business ultimately dried up, so the Hernandezes started a new Internet business, aqui.com, helping foreign nationals transfer money back home. Michael Ayre, a certified public accountant, gave financial advice and Emily Ayre, a marketing manager, reviewed their business plan. Everything appeared to be on the up-and-up.

Janeen continued taking her daughters to church, while Mario spent his Sundays bicycling with friends.

Meantime, rumors were flying about Mario's dalliances, but Janeen never revealed anything to family and friends. Emily Ayre said she appeared to just put up with the affairs.

Then, in May 1998, Mario again ended his relationship with Burgess.

She reported him to the FBI, which already was investigating Martinez, Vanegas and the Hernandezes as part of Operation Utah Powder.

Burgess said she went to the FBI because she discovered the money laundering and wanted to protect herself and her children. Operation Utah Powder had begun in 1996 when federal agents were looking into an alleged loan scam by Martinez.

FBI agents asked Burgess to wear a wire and confront Mario about the money laundering. "I got everything they wanted on tape," she said.

Janeen and Mario pushed ahead with their Internet business.

They asked the Ayres to invest in the venture, but the couple declined. The two later wondered if they had made a mistake.

"All of the sudden, they had a massive amount of wealth," Michael Ayre said, adding that the Hernandezes bought new luxury cars and a million-dollar home in California without selling their Sandy house, which they still own.

The Hernandezes moved to California in 2000, but suffered another economic downturn, and Mario began transporting money for Colombian drug runners again.

Janeen helped with transfers and deposits, the psychological evaluation says.

"I was desperate," Mario said. "I have a huge mortgage here [in California]."

Investigators were able to prove that the Hernandezes, Martinez and Vanegas laundered \$1.1 million, but they believe the total was more than \$5 million over five years.

The Hernandezes were arrested at their California home in January 2002, a few days after a federal grand jury in Utah handed up a 146-count indictment. They later pleaded guilty to three counts each and case records were sealed while the investigation continued.

As part of plea bargains, they agreed to cooperate in the probe, leading to arrests in New York and Colombia. Mario was sentenced on Jan. 5 to 87 months in prison, 10 years less than the maximum. His term begins in February.

Vanegas was sentenced to nearly four years, and Martinez to about 4 1/2 years under plea deals. Both will be deported at the end of their terms.

Mario, as a naturalized U.S. citizen, can stay.

Their Sandy neighbors were shocked at news of the money laundering.

The Ayres describe Janeen and Mario as wonderful people and friends.
"It's sad that people can get sucked in so easily," Emily Ayre said.

Newfound faith: Since their arrest, supporters say, Mario and Janeen have embraced their church and turned their lives around.

"Now they are humble, living a quiet lifestyle," their LDS bishop said.

Due to safety concerns, Mario and federal agents asked The Tribune to withhold the names of the family's bishop and the mortgage company where the Hernandezes work.

After the arrest, Mario confessed to his bishop.

"I had to do it for my family's welfare," he said, adding that his marriage is now "great, very strong."

Their employer called them "wonderful people," but declined to comment further.

In a letter written to Kimball before Mario's sentencing, the bishop said, "I know their boss and he reports they are fair, ethical, good to customers and very hard workers." He also said the Hernandezes' daughters are apprehensive about the future.

"If Janeen's sentence involves concurrent jail time [with Mario], I cannot wrap my mind around what will happen to their family," he told The Tribune, a sentiment echoed by the Ayres.

But Gummow has doubts about whether Mario has changed and blames him for drawing Janeen into crime.

The psychologist wrote: "If he had been a faithful and loving husband, would she have felt the need to enter into the money laundering scheme?"

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