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Monica Yant Kinney: Gun trafficking: Spread the blame



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Reading my colleagues' recent investigation, "Justice: Delayed, Dismissed, Denied," you may have noticed a theme in the criminal cases that stall and die in Philadelphia's crazy court system: guns.

Specifically, guns that their owners had no earthly right possessing, given their age or rap sheets.

Today, I introduce you to a guy who put guns in criminals' hands. I'll call him "Jerome," because now that he's served 4 1/2 years in federal prison, he's walking a straight line. I've reviewed his court file and talked with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives about his two-year, 160-gun trafficking spree.

It began in 1996 after Jerome lost his job and a friend said he could make fast cash selling his 9mm Lorcin.

"I drove to North Philadelphia and waited in the car," Jerome told me at a diner in Olney. "My buddy came out and gave me \$300 in ones, fives, and tens."

Like any savvy entrepreneur, he reinvested his earnings. "That same day, I bought two more guns for \$110 each. I called the same guy and sold them for \$600."

Under Pennsylvania law, with a clean record, Jerome could buy as many guns as he could afford. The only snag? It was illegal.

"Almost from the beginning," he said, "they knew what I was up to."

Money to be made

Federal regulations require gun shops to report to the ATF anyone buying two or more weapons in a five-day period. Soon, a federal agent paid Jerome a visit, as is customary, to ask about his purchases.

He was scared but didn't stop. Instead, he doubled down, shopping twice a week at stores such as Mike & Kates on Oxford Avenue and Delia's on Torresdale.

He never had a problem unloading his wares to drug dealers.

"You can tell just by looking where there's money to be made," he told me. "I'd just pull up to a corner and open my trunk."

Jerome's customers were uninformed but flush.

"The guns they wanted were cheap - MAC, SKS, copies from China and Bulgaria," he said, "but they didn't know that because they'd never been in a gun shop."

As a result, Jerome easily resold a \$199 MAC-90 (a Chinese semiautomatic copy of an AK-47) for \$900. He made even more when he satisfied young thugs' specific requests.

After "the movie *Desperado* came out, there was a lot of demand for the Ruger .45 ACP," he said. "They all wanted two, one for each hand, just like the guy [Antonio Banderas] in the film."

Sharing the blame

The more Jerome bought, the more he wondered about sellers who accepted his small bills, knowing that he bought weapons favored by criminals, not collectors.

"There was no way I could be buying five, six, seven guns a week and not be reselling."

Mike & Kates owner Mike Panamarenko defended himself when I called. Selling guns, after all, is a legal business. "We're not law enforcement. We can't profile. To deny someone a purchase based on what-ifs or what might be could put you in a courtroom real fast."

After owning his gun shop for 40 years, Fred Delia still struggles to read customers' faces.

"One guy just came in here and bought five handguns. He hit the lottery," Delia told me. "You don't really know what they're doing. They can lie. Just because you bought five guns doesn't mean you've done anything illegal yet."

In fall 1999, Jerome was charged with dealing firearms without a license. Investigators tallied at least 160 weapons - it could be double that - but recovered only 32. Prosecutors said one had been used in a drug-related homicide, a fact that haunts Jerome.

"I'll never know what happened to those guns," he fretted. "Someone might use one of them on me."

Facing a maximum of five years, he pleaded guilty and started talking. At his 2001 sentencing, prosecutors praised his cooperation.

"I was amazed at some of the detailed information he was able to give the ATF agents," Assistant U.S. Attorney Barbara J. Cohan said. He "helped them put together a picture of what was going on in the street."

At the time, she said, several gun dealers were being investigated. How did the probe end? ATF officials wouldn't tell me. The shops that Jerome frequented remain open.

Watching the news, Jerome knows he's partly responsible for the city's crisis of violence. But he thinks there's blame to go around.

"I knew it would come to an end for me. I just wish those gun dealers were held accountable."