

Businessman stole tens of thousands

BY ART BUKOWSKI

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LELAND -- The prominent local businessman toiled for years to earn the elderly, German immigrant's trust. A chore here, some help there, and all the while a sharp eye on the old woman's finances.

But authorities said John Sisson offered more than a helping hand. He helped himself to tens of thousands of Berta Anna Steinkamp's dollars.

Yet it was Steinkamp who drew the Leland community's scorn when police began asking about her vanishing savings.

Sisson, 54, owns Sisson's Main Street Specialties in Leland and used to own the Leelanau Country Inn on M-22 south of Leland.

"Most people knew John Sisson as a church-going business owner and a respectable member of the community ... no one could believe that this could be true," said Detective Clint Kerr of the Leelanau County Sheriff's Department. "In situations like this, I think people feel like they need to choose sides, and unfortunately they chose to side with John Sisson. Hopefully, they'll see a more accurate picture now."

Sisson pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor charge of embezzlement from a vulnerable adult in Leelanau County District Court Friday. He will pay \$50,000 in restitution to Steinkamp, 88, who moved to Leland in 1993.

Kerr believes Sisson may have taken as much as \$203,000 from Steinkamp between 1999 and 2006 after befriending her in the early 1990s, but officials contend they can't prove that beyond a reasonable doubt and wanted a quick resolution to the case, for Steinkamp's sake.

"She needs some finality," said Doug Donaldson, Leelanau County chief assistant prosecutor. "This weighed heavily on her."

District Judge Thomas J. Phillips sent Sisson to jail pending an April sentencing. He also wanted probation officials to confirm that Steinkamp doesn't want any more than \$50,000 in restitution.

Steinkamp declined comment after Friday's plea.

Steinkamp was close to Sisson's mother-in-law, and Sisson began looking after Steinkamp's finances in the mid-1990s, officials say. He eventually gained complete control of her finances and had her bank statements sent to him.

"When I spoke with her she didn't even know where she banked," Kerr said.

Kerr's police report shows Sisson wrote checks to himself using Steinkamp's money and paid health insurance premiums and other expenses with her money. He also frequently moved her money around to different accounts and made deposits into her accounts, the report shows.

"There was a whole shell game of moving money around," Kerr said. "It wasn't as simple as taking a chunk of money from her account and putting it into his."

Sisson and his wife moved in with Steinkamp for a period, and police eventually were contacted in 2006 by hospital workers who treated Steinkamp for a slip-and-fall accident. They were suspicious because Sisson became combative when the hospital wanted to send Steinkamp home, Kerr said.

Kerr believes Sisson hoped to commit Steinkamp.

Donaldson contends Steinkamp's advanced age could have harmed her credibility on the witness stand. Both Kerr and Donaldson are satisfied with Sisson's plea.

"I think it was everybody's agreement that this is a good resolution," Kerr said.

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