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Joint Investigation Leads to Arrest of Local Restaurant Owner for Multiple Sexual Assaults

TRENTON – Mercer County Prosecutor Angelo J. Onofri, Lawrence Township Police Chief Christopher Longo and Trenton Police Director Steve Wilson announced today that a complex investigation into multiple sexual assaults in Mercer County has resulted in the arrest of a local restaurant owner.

Gerald Araya, 44, of Ewing, NJ, was arrested in Trenton on Wednesday afternoon. He is charged with five counts of first-degree aggravated sexual assault, one count of first-degree sexual assault, two counts of second-degree sexual assault, one count of first-degree kidnapping, two counts of fourth-degree criminal sexual contact and one count of third-degree endangering the welfare of a child. The prosecutor's office has filed a motion to detain Araya pending trial.

On Wednesday afternoon, June 19, 2024, search warrants were executed at Araya's residence in Ewing Township, along with three establishments he owns and operates in Trenton: El Catador Lounge Restaurant on New York Avenue, Dubai Restaurant & Lounge on New York Avenue, and Mill Hill Restaurant & Lounge on South Broad Street. He was taken into custody without incident outside of his Mill Hill Restaurant & Lounge.

Last month, a young woman contacted the Trenton police to report a sexual assault and a joint investigation with the MCPO Special Victims Unit ensued. The victim informed detectives that she met Araya during a job interview at Dubai Restaurant & Lounge. Araya wanted the victim to see his other establishments in Trenton so they left Dubai. They arrived at another bar in Trenton

where Araya began making the victim drinks and insisting she try them so she knew what she was serving patrons. The victim reported feeling ill and telling Araya she wanted to go home. The next memory the victim had was of waking up in a room naked and being sexually assaulted by Araya. Further investigation revealed that the assault took place at a motel in Lawrence Township while the victim was physically helpless.

Through an intricate, sensitive investigation by the MCPO SVU, the TPD and the LTPD, detectives were able to identify three more victims who previously worked for Araya.

“This investigation was truly a cooperative effort and a perfect example of how successful law enforcement can be when we work together,” said Prosecutor Onofri. “From the lead detectives who operated with unwavering commitment on this case from the beginning to the four brave woman who came forward to share their stories and work with investigators to ensure this predator was taken off of the streets. No one can do it alone. We will continue to work with our partners and our communities to make Mercer County safe.”

“First and foremost, I want to acknowledge the victims of these heinous acts. They are survivors. It took a great deal of courage, trust in our detectives, and patience with the process to get to this point,” said Director Wilson. “I appreciate the tremendous work of all the personnel involved, specifically Trenton Police SVU Detective Lizmary Rivera and Trenton Police ABC Detective Cathiria Colon, for their months of tireless hard work and dedication to this investigation. This was a collaborative effort that could not have been achieved without the resources and assistance of the Mercer County Prosecutor's Office, under the leadership of Prosecutor Angelo Onofri, and the Lawrence Township Police Department under the leadership of Chief Christopher Longo. This investigation is a testament to our dedication to bringing criminals to justice, regardless of who they are or how much money they have.”

“The investigation and subsequent arrest of Gerald Araya is the result of a strong partnership and collaboration between the Lawrence Township Police Department, the Trenton Police Department and the Mercer County Prosecutor's Office,” said Chief Longo. “The arrest in this case underscores our collective dedication to bringing justice to victims of sexual assault.”

Prosecutor Onofri commended all of the individuals and agencies involved in this extensive investigation. He thanked the members of his Special Victims Unit who led and coordinated the operation for the Mercer County Prosecutor's Office, particularly Detective Sergio Sanchez, Sergeant Ahmad Mansur, Assistant Prosecutor Brett Berman and Assistant Prosecutor Alycia Beyrouthy, SVU chief; and lead detectives Suzanne Girard of the Lawrence Township Police Department, and Cathiria Colon and Lizmary Rivera of the Trenton Police Department.

Prosecutor Onofri also thanked the following local, county and federal agencies for their investigative support and assistance with yesterday's search warrant executions:

- Mercer County Prosecutor's Office
- Mercer County Prosecutor's Special Investigations Unit

- Mercer County Tactical Response Team
- Ewing Police Department
- Lawrence Township Police Department
- Trenton Police Department
- Homeland Security Investigations

The investigation is ongoing. Anyone with information is asked to contact the prosecutor's SVU at (609) 989-6568 or mcposvu@mercercounty.org.

First-degree crimes carry a sentence of 10 to 20 years in state prison and a fine of up to \$200,000. Second-degree crimes carry a sentence of five to 10 years in state prison and a fine of up to \$150,000. Third-degree charges carry a sentence of three of five years in prison and a fine of up to \$15,000. Fourth-degree charges carry a sentence of up to 18 months in prison and a fine of up to \$10,000.

Despite having been charged, every defendant is presumed innocent until found guilty beyond a reasonable doubt in a court of law.

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Gerald Araya