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Classic Car Reunited With Owner After a Detour Through Criminal Underworld

"I didn't know anything about cars before. Now I know a lot about this one car and all these different car attributes and parts and upgrades," plaintiff's counsel Catherine Pastrikos Kelly said.

By Charles Toutant, February 06, 2024



*Catherine Pastrikos Kelly
Meyner and Landis LLP*

A New Jersey court battle ended with a happy reunion when a classic car was rescued from civil forfeiture and returned to its rightful owner after a 12-year separation.

An Essex County Superior Court judge ruled Jan. 29 that a 1987 Buick Regal GNX is the property of Latchman Raghunandan, who last saw the car in 2012 when it was stolen from outside a restaurant in Belleville, New Jersey. The judge rejected a claim to the car by Angel Tirado, who was facing a civil forfeiture action by Irvington, New Jersey, based on the vehicle's alleged use in the sale of narcotics.

Raghunandan recovered the car with help from Catherine Pastrikos Kelly and Matthew Dolan of Meyner and Landis in Newark, New Jersey. They waged a four-year court battle to recover the Buick, contending with a phony vehicle identification number and slow-moving proceedings during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Regal GNX was a rare model with only 547 issued that year, making it a collector's item, the plaintiff's suit claimed. Raghunandan had a strong attachment to the Buick, Kelly said, as he bought it to pass down to his son. After it was stolen, Raghunandan never gave up on getting it back, hiring a private investigator who located it in an impound lot in 2020.

But locating it was just the beginning of the owner's battle to reclaim the beloved vehicle. In December 2019, the vehicle was seized from Tirado's home. At the time of the seizure, Tirado was charged with violating laws concerning the manufacture and distribution of marijuana, cocaine, heroin, oxycodone and ecstasy, along with the unlawful possession of a weapon without a permit to carry and the possession of firearms while committing a controlled dangerous substance offense, according to court papers. Authorities seized the Buick, two other vehicles and \$5,263 in cash from the home on that date, according to court papers.

The car in the impound lot had a different vehicle identification number than Raghunandan's vehicle, but otherwise it was a match. It had a unique stereo speaker only sold at one store in Massachusetts, which was installed before Raghunandan bought the vehicle. In addition, engine modifications Raghunandan had made



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were intact, and a set of keys he had held onto through the years matched the car's doors, glove box and ignition switch, Kelly said.

In February 2020, Raghunandan filed suit against Tirado and Irvington, claiming that Irvington was improperly holding the seized vehicle despite his superior rights to it. The suit sought a declaratory judgment requiring the defendants to give up any claim to the car.

Irvington didn't put up a fight, but Tirado disputed Raghunandan's suit. Tirado sought to present expert testimony about the VIN from a mechanic, Juan Cartegena, but the judge rejected that testimony as a net opinion, according to court papers.

An expert for Raghunandan testified that the digits in the car's vehicle identification number appeared unevenly spaced, suggesting that they were not original. The VIN was traced to another car that was destroyed in a fire in 2009, Kelly said.

Superior Court Judge Jeffrey Beacham issued his ruling after a one-day bench trial. The judge ruled for Raghunandan after finding his mechanical expert's testimony credible, particularly regarding the set of keys that matched the car, the stereo speaker, engine modifications and the VIN, Kelly said.



*Judge Jeffrey Beacham,
Essex County Superior
Court*

Judge Jeffrey Beacham of Essex County Superior Court.

"He said it was almost impossible for this car not to be plaintiff's car. He thought that plaintiff's expert was very credible that it was the same car when he testified that he recognized it. He said there was no question in the court's mind that it was the same vehicle," Kelly said.

Tirado's attorney, Robert Carter Pierce, a solo practitioner in Wall, New Jersey, did not respond to a call about the case.

For Kelly, who typically handles business litigation, recovering the car on behalf of her client was a little different than what she is accustomed to. She admits she didn't think much about cars before taking the case.

"One of the reasons why I love being a lawyer is that I get to dive deep into areas that I wouldn't normally know about, like, for example, cars, the car world. I didn't know anything about cars before. Now I know a lot about this one car and all these different car attributes and parts and upgrades," she said.

"It was great to be able to have a good result for our client. When something's stolen, I think people feel violated. And it's amazing that we were able to find the car so many years later," she said.

The lawyer for Irvington, David L. Epstein of Post Polak in Roseland, New Jersey, said his client was a "captive party" in the case because it had possession of the car, but did not take a position on the dispute between the other parties.

"We just wanted this thing to be resolved as soon as possible. It was a matter of who wins the car, and the plaintiff won. It looked to me like they were going to win from the get-go," Epstein said. "We're just happy that a resolution was done."