

TRUSTING HER PROVED TO BE A COSTLY MISTAKE

*Smithfield woman
stole over \$2 million
from friends, others*

By Tim McGlone
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NORFOLK

Larry Lester was in the intensive care unit of a hospital recovering from a heart attack and a car accident when longtime friend Linda T. Rowland paid him a visit.

Rowland persuaded a groggy Lester to sign a power of attorney document, then went to

his house and persuaded his ex-wife (who was living with him again) to turn over his checkbooks.

At the time, two years ago, Rowland and her husband owned Rowland Equipment Co. in Smithfield and Lester, a landscaper, was a frequent customer.

"She said she didn't think Larry would mind," said Catherine Lester, the ex-wife.

Rowland then obtained tens of thousands of dollars in cash and loans in Lester's name, destroying, he says, his

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the case

Linda T. Rowland was sentenced to 5 years and 8 months in prison Monday. Prosecutors said she stole the money to "support her affluent lifestyle," including buying an Outer Banks beach house, a cabin in southwest Virginia and a timeshare in Florida.

ms' identities were used to secure loans

In one theft, Rowland stole the identity of Smithfield resident Joseph Munford two days after attending his funeral. She even brought over food for the family, according to his daughter, Shannon Spain.

Spain said when she confronted Rowland about the loan, Rowland responded: "Oh my gosh, oh my gosh."

"She was upset, but she assured me everything was A-OK," Spain said. "I wanted to believe her."

Spain later learned that she was one of 34 victims and that Rowland had obtained 120 loans and two credit cards in their names.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Katherine Lee Martin called Rowland's actions shameless.

"She took advantage of grieving families," Martin told the judge.

Martin said the amount of the nine-year scheme actually topped \$2 million but that Rowland had made payments on the loans through the years. She said Rowland used the proceeds to help run the family business and to "support her affluent lifestyle," including buying an Outer Banks beach house, a cabin on 20 acres in southwest Virginia and a timeshare in Florida.

Martin sought a prison term of around seven years. Rowland's attorney Andrew Protogyrou asked for slightly more than four, citing her "exemplary life" before this, her health issues and her cooperation in the in-

vestigation.

U.S. District Judge Mark S. Davis essentially came down in the middle, calling the sentence "just and appropriate." He also ordered Rowland to repay \$1.24 million. She has already repaid about \$300,000.

Rowland pleaded guilty in July to wire fraud and aggravated identity theft. The identity theft charge carried a mandatory minimum prison term of two years. Her sentencing had been delayed because of health problems.

The Rowlands have since sold the business to one of their sons. It is now called Powerhouse Equipment Inc.

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