

Cops: Three Car Burglary Arrests Last Week only the Tip of the 'Felony Lane Gang'

Author : David Gurliacci

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Three Florida men [arrested last week](#) by Darien police in connection with motor vehicle burglaries in town appear to be a tiny part of an enormous gang, hundreds strong, who steal purses from cars, Darien police said.

The following account is based on a Darien police description of their investigation, which contains accusations not proven in court:

Police believe the men already arrested had also broken into cars last week, both in a lot at Cherry Lawn Park and in the parking lot at the Darien YMCA.

A second group of men, connected with the Darien arrestees, were found and arrested in West Haven in connection with motor vehicle break-ins near that community.

Police say the 10-year-old group they've named the "Felony Lane Gang," based in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., has had 700 known members, has been conducting car break-ins as professional criminals in at least 40 states, and has several distinct ways it typically commits its crimes.

"Felony Lane" is a nickname for the far right lane at a bank drive-up window. It's the lane, often farthest from the bank teller, that criminals typically use when committing fraud with a bank account.

Darien police were able to make the first three arrests in the case in West Haven, with the help of local police there, after three crucial pieces of evidence gave them big breaks.

First, they were able to partially identify a license plate used by thieves in Darien. Then they were able to track a stolen phone and find the person who had it, who told them where he found it in West Haven.

Finally, within a couple of days, an employee at an urgent care clinic in West Haven found stolen purses in a trash bin and had the decency to call a phone number left on an "if found" card put in the purse by the father of one of the victims.

Those breaks led Darien police to help West Haven police search hotel registries and parking lots, which led to arrests of three more men working out of a separate vehicle and a cache of money and stolen items.

Here's the police account in roughly chronological order:

Cherry Lawn Park parking lot, Monday, Sept. 7

The first series of thefts in Darien occurred in the parking lot of Cherry Lawn Park between 5:30 and 7 p.m. on Labor Day (Monday), Sept. 7.

Two purses, one belonging to an 18-year-old Stamford woman, the other to her 43-year-old mother, were in a 2003 Honda Pilot. The younger woman had left on the floor in front of the rear passenger-side seat a cherry-colored shoulder purse which contained \$10 in cash. The older woman had a Longchamp brand handbag containing \$300 in cash, her driver's license and numerous forms of identification.

Officers looked around the parking lot and found a 2008 white Mercedes parked in the lot. A 41-year-old Darien woman had parked the car there at about 6 p.m. The front passenger window was smashed and a brown leather purse containing a black Michael Kors brand wallet was taken from the front passenger seat.

The wallet contained seven credit cards, several gift cards and \$100 in cash, along with a checkbook and the

victim's driver's license (no one made any suspicious purchases with the credit cards).

At about 7:30 p.m. the next day, an employee at an urgent-care business on Campbell Avenue in West Haven called the 18-year-old's father to say that the purse had been found. It was in a dumpster outside, near a Burger King restaurant.

Seven tenths of a mile away from the Cherry Lawn parking lot thefts, a truck belonging to a landscaper was stolen after a witness said she saw a white van park near the truck. The [truck was taken](#) midday on Tuesday, Sept. 8, the day after the break-ins at Cherry Lawn.

Police are still investigating to see whether or not the truck, which was later found in New Canaan, was the work of the same thieves.

Darien YMCA parking lot, Wednesday, Sept. 9

On Wednesday, Sept. 9, some cars parked at the Darien YMCA parking lot at 2420 Post Road were broken into.

One woman who called police said she had parked her 2014 BMW X3 at about 8 a.m., then came back to it at 9 a.m. to find the passenger-side window smashed and an orange leather purse containing her iPhone 6, driver's license and various credit cards taken from the passenger seat.

At about the same time, a red handbag was taken from a second vehicle — a 2014 Honda Odyssey — from between the two front seats after the driver's-side window was smashed. The purse also contained gift cards and credit cards along with about \$200 in cash, according to the owner, a 58-year-old Darien woman.

Also in the parking lot, a red canvas bag was taken from a 2011 Toyota Highlander after the rear passenger-side window was smashed. Inside the bag was the woman's New Mexico driver's license and various credit cards.

Surveillance video of the parking lot showed two black males getting in and out of a white Ford Explorer and peeking into almost every car in the parking lot for somewhere between 15 and 30 minutes. Police were able to get partial identification of the Connecticut license plate on the car — the first few letters and numbers.

After Darien police had notified other area police departments that they were looking for a vehicle with a license plate number that began "EF", they were told by someone from Greenwich police that a license plate had been stolen in Stamford. The plate's number had the same initial numbers and letters.

Tracking the phone

Using the "find my phone" feature on the iPhone stolen from the BMW in the Darien YMCA parking lot, police found that the phone was in West Haven on Thursday afternoon, Sept. 12. Soon they found the phone

was traveling around and even seemed to be on Interstate 95. Initially, police were planning to stop the vehicle with Westport police where the highway goes through that town, but soon they found that the phone was at a rest stop in Fairfield.

Going there, police got a very good idea that they were almost in the exact same spot as the phone. Then, as a white panel truck drove off, they found the phone was moving, too. They followed the truck southbound on Interstate 95 and stopped it in Darien.

The driver, a 60-year-old New Jersey man told police that he had found the phone on the ground in a parking lot of a hotel in West Haven. (The location wasn't far from where the purses were found.) He had brought it to the hotel clerk and offered to leave it at the front desk, but the clerk told him the phone wasn't reported missing by any of the guests. He called his son to get his advice, and the son suggested he leave the phone on and someone would call for it.

Instead, he had multiple police vehicles surrounding his truck. Darien Police Sgt. Jeremiah Marron Jr., who was working on the case and following the truck, said he was wondering if the truck contained a lot of the stolen items. It didn't. The driver's story checked out, police said, and they don't suspect him of having any criminal involvement at all in the matter.

Finding the phone helped police establish that the thieves likely had been staying at the same hotel as the truck driver, or possibly one very close by. Police worked with West Haven police to find out who was staying at West Haven hotels and police looked for vehicles similar to the white Ford Explorer the men were driving, with the stolen license plate or another that began with "EF."

First arrests — men charged with Darien crimes

On Thursday, the same day that police stopped the man driving the truck, West Haven police late at night stopped the vehicle they were looking for. Inside were three men along with various stolen credit cards, stolen checks and stolen property, including purses and wallets that could be linked to thefts in nearby communities.

Also in the vehicle: A change purse that police could show had been taken from the Toyota Highlander that had been broken into in the Darien YMCA parking lot. Along with the iPhone 6 owned by one of the victims of the YMCA burglaries, it was the only item police have been able to recover from any of the Darien thefts.

One of the men in the vehicle, Kenton Chance, was already suspected of belonging to the "Felony Lane Gang." He also had two arrest warrants, one from Alabama, the other from Broward County in Florida. Chance had \$5,000 in cash on him. He has been arrested 41 times.

Thieves from the Felony Lane Gang typically work in groups out of multiple vehicles and stay in an area while they continue to be able to steal from there. They also typically have young black men stealing purses from cars and white women using identification and checks from the thefts to go to banks and get money.

The thieves, usually from Fort Lauderdale, also always use rental vehicles, typically rented from there. The cars always have tinted windows, and shortly before the thefts or before they approach banks to cash checks, they steal license plates and attach them to the vehicles, sometimes with rubber bands.

More arrests in West Haven

Police in West Haven continued to check hotels, looking especially hard for Florida rental vehicles.

On Saturday, West Haven police received a call that three suspicious black males at a CVS had tried to buy large dollar amounts of money-pack reloadable credit cards.

Management at the store refused to take their money, in large part because they were offering such large amounts of it. A dispute developed that sounded like a breach of peace, and police went to the scene.

Police arrived as four men in a car were leaving. The men left the car to try to escape, but police grabbed one juvenile who had \$7,500 in cash on him and took another suspect into custody. They later found a third at a hotel in West Haven.

None of these three men had any direct links to any Darien thefts, as far as police were able to discover by Monday. But in that same hotel room police found paperwork connected to Kenton Chance's arrest.

Also in the hotel room were two white women. They weren't charged with any crimes. In one car, police found wigs.

Investigation continues

Police from Greenwich, Stamford, Darien and Trumbull are all looking into thefts in connection with reports of a white Ford Explorer nearby, so detectives from various police agencies are interested in the case, Marron said.

Greenwich police were interviewing some of the arrested suspects on Monday. Police from several towns in Massachusetts are also interested in the case.

Police applied for and received search warrants for four different hotel rooms and for the car. In the car, they found, among many other items, a personal check stolen from a vehicle parked at a country club in [Andover, Mass.](#) In the hotel rooms, police found dozens of gift cards, and \$13,000 in cash in one room.

Police typically suggest that one way to prevent vehicle break-ins is to avoid leaving purses and similar valuables on seats or easily visible from outside the car. The thieves caught on surveillance video in the YMCA parking lot carefully looked through the windows of almost all of the cars in the lot.

But at Sleeping Giant State Park on Saturday, thieves not only broke into seven vehicles through the windows, they opened up trunks from inside the car to steal purses that were in the trunks.

Police believe the thieves may have watched as women put their purses in the trunks.

Felony Lane Gang thieves typically go to the parking lots of parks, fitness centers and day-care facilities, police said.

The group usually recruits prostitutes, homeless people and drug addicts to help cash the checks.

Police are looking into links between the second group arrested and thefts in Milford, Orange and Hamden. Darien police detectives are continuing to investigate the matter, looking through property for items taken from this town.