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Fla. police bust \$100M retail-theft ring

By Amy L. Edwards
The Orlando Sentinel

LAKELAND, Fla. — A retail-theft ring headed by a Lake Mary couple may have stolen up to \$100 million worth of health and beauty products from retail and grocery stores during the past five years, Polk County detectives said Thursday.

Eighteen people suspected of taking part in the operation face racketeering charges, including the couple described as the ringleaders, Steven Lee Coburn, 46, and Kerry A. Coburn, 39.

"This is big-time organized crime," Polk Sheriff Grady Judd said. "What we found was absolutely astounding."

The investigation, which involved several law-enforcement agencies, began seven months ago after two people were caught shoplifting \$4,500 in merchandise from a Publix in Mulberry.

Judd said detectives were "absolutely shocked" when they learned of the magnitude of the ring, which is thought to have struck stores in Orange, Lake and Polk counties, as well as throughout Tampa Bay.

The ring involved more than a dozen "boosters" who paired up to systematically take products off store shelves at Wal-Mart, Target, and various grocery chains.

Judd said the "boosters" would strike eight stores a day, and within three minutes, snatch \$4,000 in merchandise.

They hid the items, such as Crest Whitestrips and Gillette razors, in purses designed to help conceal their actions.

"They were so good at what they did, you could literally watch them steal and not be aware of what they were doing," Judd said.

Detectives viewed surveillance video from businesses, finding in one case that a supermarket supervisor walked down the aisle past the suspects while they were stealing.

"They were just that good at what they did," Judd said.

Stolen items were then sold on the Internet and at Florida flea markets. Detectives said the Coburns sold some of the merchandise on their Web site: sale awaysavings.com.

According to state records, Steven Coburn is director of that company, which sells drugstore-type products.

He is also listed as director of Suncoast Liquidation in Lake Mary.

Judd said the Coburns did not deal directly with the 13 "boosters," described as relatives or friends of one another.

Instead, that task was given to a Tampa couple, Theresa Reynolds Parrish, 44, and Ronald Parrish, 41, investigators said. Theresa Parrish gave shopping lists to the thieves to tell them what products were needed, Judd said.

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Detectives watched members of the ring on eight shopping sprees in one day. Based on the amount of goods stolen that day, investigators estimate the ring might have stolen as much as \$100 million in five years.

On Thursday, 92 law-enforcement officers were involved in the case — dubbed "Operation Beauty Stop" — serving search warrants at homes and business warehouses throughout Central Florida and Tampa Bay.

Video taken from one search showed a Tampa warehouse stacked full of merchandise: boxes and plastic containers of Tylenol, Mederma, Prilosec OTC and bubble-gum-colored fingernail polish.

The Coburns and most of the other suspects were in custody Thursday.

Judd said there was no way to tell exactly how many stores the ring struck in its five years of operation.

"Let's talk about how many haven't been hit. That would be better," he said. "As far as I know, they have probably hit every supermarket in Central Florida."

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