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**D.A. BROWN: WESTCHESTER MAN POSING AS“COLLECTOR”
SENTENCED TO 5 TO 15 YEARS IN PRISON FOR \$75,000 EXTORTION SCAMS**

Defendant Attempted To Shake Down Queens Rabbi and Car Dealership Manager

Queens District Attorney Richard A. Brown today announced that a Westchester man who claimed to represent people who were owed money and pleaded guilty to physically threatening a Kew Gardens rabbi and the manager of a Jamaica auto dealership in an attempt to extort \$75,000 from the two Orthodox men last year has been sentenced to five to fifteen years in state prison.

District Attorney Brown said, “Following his initial contact with the defendant and despite grave physical threats to his family, the rabbi refused to be victimized or silenced and bravely contacted my office. He then agreed to assist in bringing the defendant to justice by having his telephone calls recorded and the extortion attempt videotaped. Much to the defendant’s dismay, he has now learned that there is no such thing as an ‘easy target’ to exploit. The term of imprisonment imposed is more than warranted.”

The District Attorney identified the defendant as Matthew Gross, 40, of 25 Parkview Avenue in Bronxville, New York. The defendant pleaded guilty on September 21, 2006, to two counts of second-degree grand larceny (extortion) before Queens Supreme Court Justice Mark Spires, who yesterday sentenced him to concurrent terms of three to six years and five to fifteen years in prison.

According to the District Attorney, in pleading guilty the defendant admitted that he tried to extort \$60,000 from Rabbi Aryeh Sokoloff, who leads the 380- member Orthodox Kew Gardens Synagogue Adath Yeshurun on Lefferts Boulevard, between September 15 and September 19, 2005. The \$60,000 allegedly represented a debt owed by the ex-husband of Rabbi Sokoloff’s former secretary, for whom he had helped secure a divorce in 1998. The defendant implied that the debt was owed to “certain” people, that he represented their interests and that he would physically harm the rabbi and his family unless the money was paid. After contacting the District Attorney’s office, a meeting was scheduled for September 19, 2005, in which the defendant agreed to meet Rabbi Sokoloff at his synagogue. During the meeting – which was videotaped – the defendant twice slapped Rabbi Sokoloff and threatened him and his family with physical injury. Gross and an accomplice – Pinchas Elgaoi, 51, of 135-11 77th Avenue in Flushing – were arrested soon after taking \$1,000 from the rabbi as a partial payment.

District Attorney Brown noted that co-defendant Elgaoi, a mechanic who worships at another temple, allegedly brokered the meeting. His case is presently pending and he is scheduled to appear in court on December 14, 2006.

The District Attorney said that Gross also admitted that he previously extorted \$15,000 from Marcos Benzaquen, the manager of the International Auto Mall, located at 187-39 Jamaica Avenue in Jamaica, between May 9 and May 16, 2005, by similarly threatening him with physical harm. The \$15,000 debt was allegedly owed to a man with whom the victim had some business dealing six years prior.

The investigation was conducted by former Detective Michael Mormino of the District Attorney’s Detective Bureau under the supervision of Lawrence J. Festa, Chief Investigator and Albert D. Velardi, Deputy Chief Investigator.

Assistant District Attorney Gerard A. Brave, Bureau Chief of the District Attorney’s Organized Crime and Rackets Bureau, prosecuted the case under the supervision of Executive Assistant District Attorney for Investigations Peter A. Crusco and Deputy Executive Assistant District Attorney for Investigations Linda M. Cantoni.

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Note to Editors: Press release e-version posted at www.queensda.org.