

Mother, son accused of stealing Lionel trains from man

SUZANNE RUSSELL

@SRUSSELLMYCJ

SAYREVILLE — A Sayreville man has recovered some of his prized Lionel trains but is still hoping to recover more now that a Kearny mother and son have been accused of stealing about \$64,000 worth of his collectibles.

On Wednesday Jeffrey O'Connor, 23, and his mother, Beverly A. Michaels, 53, both of Kearny, were arrested and charged with theft, according to Detective Sgt. David Lasko. They were released after posting \$5,000 bail each.

Lasko said the investigation, conducted by Sgt. Sean O'Donnell and detectives Richard Belotti and Matt Kurtz, is continuing.

"Twenty years of collecting is down the drain. Some of the pieces are irreplaceable. Some of these pieces are one-in-a-lifetime pieces," Charles Leary said about his Lionel train collection that included one piece he bought for \$6,000 that was stolen. "I hope they didn't sell them."

He believes many of the pieces he bought from O'Connor were stolen back, including a collection of little items worth



Jeffrey O'Connor and Beverly Michaels

about \$1,800. He estimates \$64,000 worth of his Lionel train collection was stolen during the past nine months.

Leary, a retired corrections lieutenant, said as a kid he enjoyed playing with trains. Now as an adult, he collects them and has assembled a collection of about 200 Lionel trains and accessories, in new or like new condition.

"This was my hobby," he said.

He said the toy train pieces are valuable, costing anywhere from a few hundred dollars to several thousand.

About a year ago, Leary befriended O'Connor on eBay, where he had posted a Lionel train for sale. Leary bought the train and asked O'Connor if he had others.

Since then, O'Connor has visited Leary's home once or twice a week with

his mother and sometimes a another relative to sell trains. The visits always occurred at night.

Leary said that whenever he bought a train from O'Connor, he would test it on another floor in his home, leaving O'Connor and his mother alone in another room in the house.

"Unknown to me, they were stealing from me," said Leary, adding that he has boxes of trains and parts throughout his home and didn't initially notice when a train was missing.

Leary said O'Connor and his mother would always enter his home with a big blue tub. Leary believes that while he was testing a train for purchase, they allegedly put one or two pieces from his collection into the tub. Leary said he never asked to

check the tub before they left his home.

"I didn't catch on until someone asked do you have a toy train engine," said Leary, who has attended the Train Collector Association show in York, Pennsylvania. "When I went to look for it, it was gone."

Leary said he knew he had the engine because he still had the original decals for it.

"I couldn't find the engine and that's when I knew everything was gone," he said.

O'Connor visited Leary on Wednesday. When Leary went upstairs to test a train, O'Connor allegedly entered a bedroom and took some motorized train accessories worth several hundred dollars.

Leary said O'Connor and his mother were ar-

rested as they left his house.

Leary said he was able to get back the items that were allegedly stolen that day, but he still hopes to recover other items that were taken.

"I treated these people like family. To have this happen to me is unbelievable," he said.

Staff Writer Suzanne Russell:
732-565-7335; srussell@mycentraljersey.com.