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## Trial opens for suspect in \$200,000 jewel heist

Colombian native says he wasn't in Mt. Arlington when salesman robbed

BY PEGGY WRIGHT  
DAILY RECORD

Accused jewel thief Pedro Perez doesn't recall where he was, but he knows he wasn't in Mount Arlington on the evening that a jewelry salesman had \$200,000 worth of gems swiped from him in 2003, a defense lawyer told a jury on Tuesday.

Perez's trial on theft and conspiracy charges got under way in Superior Court, Morristown, with defense attorney Alexander Pagano saying that he "passionately" believes in the construction worker's innocence and Assistant Prosecutor Joseph D'Onofrio saying that Perez's fingerprints were found on the getaway vehicle.

The jewel courier had made his rounds on Oct. 15, 2003, and was on Route 80 when his car started breaking down. A good Samaritan helped push his vehicle to an Exxon station on Howard Boulevard in Mount Arlington.

As the courier was retrieving his satchels of gems, a minivan pulled up behind his car and a lone man jumped up and grabbed two jewel bags. He dropped one bag as he scurried to get back in the minivan, D'Onofrio said in his opening trial statement.

The light-colored minivan,

with South Carolina plates, was found afterward behind a Cracker Barrel restaurant near the Exxon. It was left idling but was empty of occupants and jewelry.

An analysis of the van revealed both Perez's fingerprints and those of another man involved in the theft, Pedro Gomez, D'Onofrio said.

Gomez, formerly of Queens, will not be called as a witness in the trial, though he implicated Perez as a co-conspirator. Gomez pleaded guilty in 2005 to conspiracy in the theft of the jewels — mostly unset diamonds — but since has been deported to his native Colombia.

Pagano, meanwhile, told jurors that there are several other people who could be suspects in the case based upon the number of fingerprints on the minivan. He said that Perez, 33, of Jackson Heights, N.Y., was acquainted with Gomez as a fellow soccer player, and that Perez often traveled in or drove the minivan for soccer games. Perez does believe that the same minivan was used in the Mount Arlington heist, Pagano said.

"There's not going to be a connection between Mr. Perez and the crime scene," Pagano said.

Perez was not arrested until Sept. 6, 2006, nearly

three years after the theft. Pagano said Perez cannot recall where he was on Oct. 15, 2003, but knows he wasn't out stealing jewels. More likely, he was doing construction work or laying sheetrock, Pagano said.

Authorities believe that the courier in Mount Arlington broke down because his transmission fuel line was deliberately severed.

### Won't be told

Jurors will not be told this, but Perez and Gomez were stopped in a minivan in Kenilworth two weeks after the Mount Arlington incident on suspicion of tailing another jewel salesman. Their fingerprints were taken and later matched to prints found inside the van left in Mount Arlington. By the time the match was made, the whereabouts of Perez and Gomez were not known.

Gomez was a fugitive for 10 months and Perez a fugitive for three years until his apprehension in New York in September.

The trial continues on Thursday before Superior Court Judge Joseph A. Falcone.

Peggy Wright can be reached at (973) 267-1142 or [pwright@gannett.com](mailto:pwright@gannett.com).