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Double life alleged: teacher, bank robber

Police say suspect seen at casino

By Peter Schworm

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She called in sick. Then, police say, she robbed a bank.

Early in the afternoon of Dec. 16, the day she didn't come to work, authorities say, a 49-year-old English teacher from Brookline, N.H., her face obscured by a multicolored scarf, showed up at Washington Savings Bank in the nearby town of Tyngsborough, handed the clerk a note on a crisp white envelope neatly folded into thirds, and left with an unspecified amount of money.

Over the course of coming days, she allegedly held up at least two more banks, in Connecticut and Massachusetts, each time wrapped in the colorful scarf and each time delivering a note on a neatly folded envelope.

Police say the teacher, Gail Rasmussen, took at least \$3,000 in total, and that 20 minutes after one of the robberies, she was spotted at Mohegan Sun Casino.

"It is out of the realm of anything I've experienced," said Susan Hodgson, superintendent of the Hollis-Brookline school district where Rasmussen taught English to seventh-graders. "Safe to say her personal life was something we weren't aware of. Certainly nothing was amiss in the classroom."

Rasmussen was arrested after robbing a bank in Concord, Mass., where she gave the teller a note saying, "Please give me \$2,000 all large, no dye pack," according to court records. When the teller paused, Rasmussen told her to "hurry up," a police report of the crime said. The teller gave her \$1,200, including "bait" currency with known serial numbers.

After the robbery, the bank manager saw Rasmussen get into a gray Honda and speed away.

That clue, coupled with surveillance footage of the robberies that showed the same short, stocky woman dressed in heavy winter garb, her head barely clearing the cashier's window, eventually led police to Rasmussen's Brookline home. In her gray Honda, police found a multicolored scarf she allegedly wore in each of the three robberies.

Rasmussen was arraigned Wednesday in connection to the Concord robbery, and ordered to undergo evaluation by Gamblers' Anonymous. She was released on \$500 cash bail. Rasmussen will probably also face charges in the robberies in Tyngsborough and Plainfield, Conn., officials said. She did not carry or threaten to use a weapon in the thefts, police said, and they believe she acted alone.

Her alleged robbery spree and apparent double life shocked local police, who said she had no criminal record and had lived in the town for years without any hint of trouble.

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“We had no reason to believe she was any danger to her students or the community,” said Michael Kurland, a police sergeant in Brookline, which has about 5,000 residents. “We’ve never had any issues with her, and she’s been around for a long time. This is definitely an eye-opener.”

Similarly, at school she had seemed nothing but a devoted teacher. Hodgson said that Rasmussen began working as a teacher’s aide in a classroom for young children with special needs a decade ago, and quickly fell in love with teaching. Inspired by her newfound profession, she went back to school, got a teaching certificate and worked her way to a full teaching position.

Hodgson placed her on indefinite paid administrative leave until the charges are settled. She wrote parents, students, and staff yesterday describing the situation. A faculty member will take over her classes, she said.

Authorities began closing in on Rasmussen on Dec. 19 after the Plainfield robbery, when police contacted the Mohegan Sun nearby and discovered that a woman matching the robber’s description had appeared at the casino in a gray Honda.

After the robbery in Concord the next day, Concord police, noting similarities with the other bank robberies, spoke with police in Tyngsborough and began laying plans to track down Rasmussen. On their way to Rasmussen’s home about 7 a.m. Tuesday, police spotted her driving a gray Honda and followed her to a Cumberland Farms gas station, where she prepaid for gas with \$2.05 in loose change, according to a search warrant affidavit.

Then they followed her to Amherst, N.H., where she appeared to take evasive action and eluded police, the affidavit stated. A few hours later, police spoke with her when she returned home, and she agreed to be interviewed at the police station. She denied being at Mohegan Sun and asked for a lawyer, according to court records.

Authorities in both Concord and Tyngsborough said the bank robberies were the first in many years.

Shana Wickett contributed to this report. Peter Schworm can be reached at schworm@globe.com. ■

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