

Authorities: Two suspects connected to multiple car break-ins

BY NICK WATSON
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Hall County Sheriff's Office deputies found two Gainesville teenagers, who are suspects in multiple car break-ins, wearing black clothing and black masks in a stolen car in Gillsville Sunday, Feb. 16, according to authorities.

After a traffic stop, the driver of the stolen car "drove at the deputy in an attempt to strike him," according to the Sheriff's Office.

Armando Luna, 18, and Isaac Ayala, 19, were booked Sunday into the Hall County Jail.

Both men were charged with theft by taking and three counts of



Luna

Ayala

entering auto.

Ayala was charged solely with aggravated assault on a peace officer, reckless driving, fleeing or attempting to elude and other traffic-related offenses.

Luna was additionally charged with possession of methamphetamine and obstruction.

Sheriff's Office spokeswoman

B.J. Williams said all of the charges so far happened after 6 a.m. Sunday on Turning Leaf Drive.

The theft by taking charge concerned debit cards, gift cards, a Social Security card and driver's licenses taken from one of the cars, Williams said.

The investigator is also looking at other cases on Jasmine Court, Horseshoe Bend and Saddle Creek Drive to see if these two suspects are connected, Williams said.

A patrol deputy spotted the stolen car around 8:50 a.m. Sunday on Harmony Church Road and asked for other officers to help him find it.

"Two of the responding deputies, including a K9 handler, observed the vehicle at the intersection of Leafview Drive and Leafview Way and initiated a traffic stop," according to the Sheriff's Office. "A third deputy arrived, and as he exited his patrol vehicle to assist with the traffic stop, the driver of the stolen vehicle drove at the deputy in an attempt to strike him."

The officer was not injured, and the three deputies followed the suspects' car. It was ultimately found abandoned near East Vale Drive and Harmony East Drive, according to the Sheriff's Office.

Ayala was found by the K9 handler and his dog, but Luna escaped,

authorities said.

Hours later, dispatch received a 911 call about a pedestrian wearing all black on Barrett Road.

"Deputies arriving at the scene spotted the suspect as the suspect ran into the wood line," according to the Sheriff's Office. "The K9 team that tracked Mr. Ayala responded to the scene and tracked the second suspect down Pond Fork Creek, arresting him."

Officers found a dollar bill with a "small amount of methamphetamine folded in it," according to the Sheriff's Office.

The Times has reached out to Magistrate Court officials to see if Ayala and Luna have an attorney.

FROM 1A

Leonard

to January.

Gainesville Police Investigator Hannah Ruiz detailed the MO in the two thefts on Oct. 25 and Nov. 4: Two men talked with someone on Facebook with the name Thomas Jones about buying Jones' Playstation.

When the buyers got there, a different man showed up and made the deal. Subsequently, the suspect would ask for the man to take him to a nearby gas station.

Because the suspect was given a criminal trespass warning from the store, the man later identified as Leonard asked the buyer to go into the store for him, the investigator said.

"When he looked out the window, he saw that this person he just bought the Playstation from was leaving with the cash he just paid him and the Playstation," Ruiz said, describing the Oct. 25 incident.

The most serious allegations happened Dec. 13



Scott Rogers The Times

Jeremiya Leonard attends a committal hearing Monday, Feb. 17, in Hall County Magistrate Court for charges of armed robbery.

with a man trying to sell "Jones" an Xbox Series X for \$600.

Leonard was accused of giving the man \$400 in fake motion picture bills.

Ruiz said the suspect took the Xbox and pulled out a black handgun with a laser on it. The investigator reviewed surveillance footage from the Pines of Lanier apartments on Pine Cove Circle.

"The laser at one point is on (the victim's) chest," she said. "... It goes across (the victim's) car and then it also goes across some other bystanders that were in front of the leasing office as well."

That included the seller's 2-year-old boy, as Leonard was accused of saying he would kill the man and his son, Ruiz testified.

A taxi driver reported Dec. 22 that he was robbed at gunpoint, giving the suspect \$300. A week later, another taxi driver reported a similar armed robbery.

"The suspect went as far as to remove (the taxi driver's) wallet from his pocket and he looked through it," the investigator said. "There was no cash, so he didn't keep the wallet or anything. But he then saw 40 bucks up in the driver's side visor."

A phone number used in one of the taxi driver cases

was "used on Jeremiya Leonard's jail calls, and he's calling his girlfriend," Ruiz said.

Ruiz detailed a third case involving a taxi driver on Jan. 14, who reported a man pointed a black handgun with a blue laser at his head and demanded all of his money.

Leonard was accused of taking \$400.

Police said Leonard met another man Dec. 29 to buy car parts on Paces Court. During the exchange, Leonard, who identified himself as "Chucky," was accused of punching the man in the face three times, according to police.

That man talked to his brother about the case, who knew a man named "Chucky" from high school and showed him his Instagram. Leonard was identified through the Instagram account, Ruiz said.

"We at the Gainesville Police Department actually know that that account belongs to Jeremiya Leonard," Ruiz said. "It's been subpoenaed in the past."

Skinner asked how Leonard was known to the police department.

"If you say his name in a shift change room, everybody will know exactly who he is," Ruiz said. "That's due to previous cases: maybe (school resource officers) in the high school, getting called out to shootings at Otila (Drive) that he wasn't arrested for or anything, but his name was very well known."

Ruiz obtained Facebook records that showed that the profile name changed from "Chucky Leonard" to the Jones moniker.

Leonard told investigators he was not responsible for the robberies at the Pines on Lanier or the taxi driver robberies, later admitting only to the Dec. 29 incident on Paces Court, Ruiz testified.

Skinner asked if any of the victims identified Leonard by name. Ruiz said only the man from the Dec. 29 Paces Court case identified him as "Chucky."

Neither side made any arguments after Ruiz's testimony, and Magistrate Court Judge Michelle Hall moved the case on to Superior Court as charged.

FROM 1A

Retreat

The ranch off Tanners Mill Road, south of Candler Road/Ga. 60, would be operated by the long-established Free Chapel, which has a 160,000-square-foot campus at 3001 McEver Road, Gainesville.

"Most everyone in our community is familiar with what they've done for our community and what all they do," Rochester said. "This is not where they're going to be moving their campus."

Instead, Free Chapel plans to use the site, which was the former location of Fox Entertainment's "Monarch" until it was canceled in 2022, as a counseling center, as well as a place where burned-out pastors can be "re-energized."

"There's been a lot of rumors that this would be a rehab center," Rochester said. "That is not the case. ... Long-term care is not allowed."

The property — also the former longtime rural estate of Hall County businessman Milton Robson — "is going to continue to look like a ranch and low-density development but have the farm atmosphere, so that when people come there, it's a place where they can rejuvenate," Rochester said.

The property would feature a chapel, an activity/ministry center and a family counseling and wellness center. It would have 30 cabins/cottages and a lodge for overnight accommodations, according to planning documents.

"Overnight accommodations will be ... intended for exclusive use by members of the ministry and their guests, or guest group users of portions of Shiloh Ranch," documents state. "No overnight transitional, group home, or long-term rehabilitation facility will be housed or based on the property."

A "day/overnight/summer camp" also is planned "to offer a traditional Christian church camp experience for single-day, overnight, week-end (two night-three days),

or single week accommodation for groups with interest in organized camp-type activities," documents state.

Accommodations will be provided in "bunkhouse settings" and/or in combination with the cabins/cottages.

New construction wouldn't be more than 390,000 square feet. Development would occur over 10 years.

The proposal drew opposition from several residents, including concerns about the proposed rezoning to planned commercial development. The property is now zoned as agricultural-residential.

Even Planning Commission member Shannon Davidson addressed the issue of what could happen if the property is sold at some point under a commercial zoning.

Rochester said the commercial category was the only one that fit the church proposal.

"I don't know any of the zoning categories in Hall

County that would allow what they're trying to do," he said.

However, the plan's specifics would need to be followed by a new owner if the property is ever sold. For any other use, "they'd have to rezone it and do this entire process again and notify all the neighborhoods," Rochester said.

"I have to admit I am perplexed that ... people would rather have a neighborhood here than this very incredibly low-impact area that keeps most of this property pristine," he said.

Planning board member Frank Sosebee said, "I think that this is probably the least intrusive use for this property. It's one of the best uses, in my opinion."

Rochester DCCM's request is now set to go before the Hall County Board of Commissioners, which is set to take final action at a public hearing on March 27.

Gospel Singing

Thursday, February 20th, 2025

7:00PM

FEATURING:

THE INSPIRATIONS



CHRISTIAN HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

5833 GAILEY DRIVE (HWY. 129) CLERMONT, GA

REV. JIM ELLIS, PASTOR **PHONE: 770-718-7362**

706-265-0655

INTENT TO OPT OUT OF HOMESTEAD EXEMPTION

The Hall County Board of Commissioners intends to opt out of the statewide adjusted base year ad valorem homestead exemption for Hall County, Georgia.

All concerned citizens are invited to the public hearing on this matter to be held at:

Hall County Government Center
2nd Floor, Commission Meeting Room
2875 Browns Bridge Road
Gainesville, GA 30504

On Thursday, February 13, 2025, at 6:00 PM

Times and places of additional public hearings on this matter are at:

Hall County Government Center
2nd Floor, Commission Meeting Room
2875 Browns Bridge Road
Gainesville, GA 30504

On Monday, February 24, 2025, at 3:00 PM

Hall County Government Center
2nd Floor, Commission Meeting Room
2875 Browns Bridge Road
Gainesville, GA 30504

On Thursday, February 27, 2025, at 6:00 PM