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Lawyer who faked past guilty of conspiracy and forgery

By Joseph Ax

NEW YORK, Feb 15 (Reuters) - A woman whose rise through the legal profession from law school to an English courtroom was paved with forged letters of reference, inaccurate resumes and a fake birth certificate was convicted Friday in state court in Manhattan of conspiracy and forgery charges.

Soma Sengupta, 52, was found guilty by Manhattan Supreme Court Justice Thomas Farber after a bench trial. She faces up to seven years in prison at her sentencing, scheduled for next month.

"One could not help but be struck by the sheer magnitude, intensity and breadth of the defendant's lies, schemes and behavior," Farber said in delivering his verdict.

Her defense lawyer, James Kousouros, said he would appeal.

In 2000, she applied for a paralegal position with the Manhattan district attorney's office, despite having graduated from Georgetown Law School and having been admitted to the New York bar.

The DA's office does not employ admitted attorneys as paralegals, and so she claimed she had not completed her degree, prosecutors said. Kousouros said Sengupta wanted to work in public service but may have felt she couldn't get a job as an assistant district attorney.

She lost her job in 2003 when the DA's office became aware that she was an attorney and volunteered with the Legal Aid Society for several years.

In 2007, she set her sights on becoming a barrister in London. According to prosecutors, Sengupta and her husband, Manuel Soares, manufactured letters of reference from various people, including Assistant District Attorney Melissa Paoletta, who had previously provided her with such letters when she was seeking jobs in New York.

One of the letters purported to come from a Georgetown professor, Robert Drinan, who had died before the date on the letter, according to the district attorney's office.

Sengupta also created websites and false email addresses to help back up her references and forged a birth certificate and a law school transcript to reflect her doctored resume, prosecutors said. She also claimed she had worked as a Manhattan prosecutor and as a staff attorney at Legal Aid, prosecutors said.

Sengupta was accepted by one of four Inns of Court in London, a necessary step to gain admission to the English bar. She was also accepted to a training program for prospective lawyers with the firm 1 Inner Temple Lane.

She was charged in 2010 with conspiracy, filing false instruments and possessing forged documents after the Manhattan district attorney's office learned that she had claimed to be a former prosecutor and that the forged documents passed through Manhattan. Prosecutors leveled the same charges against Sengupta's husband.

'LIE UPON LIE'

"For 10 years, this defendant piled lie upon lie, until the tower of deception she built finally fell in upon itself," Manhattan District Attorney Cyrus Vance said in a statement following the verdict.

During the six-week trial, Kousouros did not dispute that Sengupta had forged documents and lied about her professional experience.

Instead, he argued that the case should be thrown out on technical grounds, including whether letters of reference fall within the definition of false instruments under the law and whether prosecutors improperly conflated multiple separate conspiracies into a single charge.

He said after the verdict that he would base his appeal on those arguments.

"It has always been our position that notwithstanding the facts, the charges brought were simply legally untenable," Kousouros said.

The case against Sengupta's husband, Soares, is pending. Soares' lawyer, Allan Brenner, could not be reached for comment Friday afternoon.

The case is People v. Sengupta, New York State Supreme Court, New York County, No. 5819-2010.

For the prosecution: Assistant district attorneys Tracy Conn and Craig Ascher.

For Sengupta: James Kousouros of The Law Offices of James Kousouros.

**---- Index References ----**

News Subject: (Crime (1CR87); Criminal Law (1CR79); Social Issues (1SO05); Legal (1LE33); Government Litigation (1GO18); Judicial Cases & Rulings (1JU36); Fraud (1FR30))

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