



Joseph Makhani with 107 West 118th Street, 5 Tideway Street in Kings Point and a map of Makhani-tied transactions

DEED THIEF

Great Neck real estate pro JOSEPH MAKHANI built a multimillion-dollar portfolio by turning paperwork into properties

By Joy BERGMANN

As the handcuffs snapped on, Joseph Makhani let out a guttural howl. Judge Michele Rodney had remanded the Great Neck landlord to Rikers to await sentencing after a Manhattan jury last month took just 90 minutes to find him guilty of three deed-theft-related felonies.

State prosecutors proved Makhani, 63, had executed “a meticulous, multi-year scheme” to steal 107 West 118th Street and 135 West 131st Street through cunning, court manipulation and deception using fake names, fake companies and fake addresses, often assisted by frontmen and attorneys willing to play along.

But Makhani’s real estate business was

not limited to those Harlem brownstones, which are just two of dozens of properties investigators say followed similar patterns.

When the New York Attorney General’s investigators began examining Makhani in 2015, they quickly recognized him as a high-volume suspect. Pretrial filings describe him as having been involved in more than 800 deed transactions by at least 100 corporate entities. By the end of the investigation, the team had uncovered at least 52 additional properties that showed signs of criminal conduct — evidence, they argued, of a three-decade operation that helped Makhani amass an empire worth \$83 million by 2016, according to court documents. His portfolio extends to residential real estate in the wealthy Kings Point section of Great Neck, where he appears to own at least one mansion and possibly several, according to records.

“I’ve done hundreds of deals, if not thousands,” Makhani testified in civil depositions. He did not take the trial stand.

The following investigation into Makhani’s business is based on 20 interviews, trial testimony and thousands of public records reviewed over two years of reporting. Actions by Makhani-tied companies are attributed here to “Makhani.” His lawyers didn’t respond to multiple requests for comment.

At home in real estate’s underbelly

Born in Iran, Makhani “came to this country with nothing,” said defense attorney Susan Necheles. Soon after arriving, he and brother Kamran “Mike” Makhani got into real estate, an industry popular among fellow Persian Jews living around Great Neck, Long Island.

Makhani coveted anonymity, according to trial testimony from a county investigator. He avoided social media and blurred Google Streetview images of his 8,400-square-foot home. He hated being photographed, hid his face and growled “Fuck off!” at courthouse reporters. He used variant spellings such as McKani, McKhani and McKany on official forms and installed employees as temporary officers of his many LLCs. Dennis Fullerton, a janitor with limited literacy skills, testified that he signed lawsuit verifications at Makhani’s request.

From an operations hub at 148-45 Hillside Avenue in Jamaica, Queens, the industrious Makhani cultivated enduring relationships with like-minded men who occupied obscure corners of the real estate market and often met at foreclosure auctions at the Queens County courthouse.

Beyond foreclosed properties, courthouse networking offered information, an especially prized commodity during the pre-internet ’90s.

It was the town square for potential partners-in-crime, where hustlers whispered tips about vulnerable homeowners behind on their bills, or, even better: dead. Some attorneys there had side gigs as court-appointed officers, privy to useful facts about estates or foreclosure cases. Other speculators would agree on an advantageous path to profits: bid-rigging.

“It’s a quasi-legal ecosystem of all these people who know each other, all wheeling and dealing,” said Bill Lienhard, an attorney who’s battled fraudsters.

According to federal prosecutors, Makhani and 24 others turned public foreclosure auctions into little more than formalities. They secretly decided among themselves who would buy each property, keeping prices artificially low, and paid out “commissions” to participants.

All 25 conspirators pleaded guilty in 1998. Makhani paid a \$20,000 fine and served a few months upstate at Otisville.

Then, he went back to work.

The playbook

Ordinary investors avoid properties with murky title chains: abandoned buildings, homes whose owners died without wills and estates split among missing or far-flung heirs. Makhani sought them out. He specialized in what he called “properties that have headaches.”

“Usually it’s not a gamble,” he said. “It’s a problem that you have to solve.”

His playbook was as follows: find a vulnerable property, manufacture or acquire a claim to it, secure legal recognition of the claim and extract value through a sale, loan or lawsuit.

To bring his plans to life, Makhani relied on a rotating network of finders and fixers to identify troubled properties and track down people whose signatures might work for deed transfers.

One recurring intermediary was Charles Simon, a notary, pastor and real estate broker who brought Makhani opportunities, and agreed to help deliver ownership rights for a fee. Prosecutors said Simon also fronted LLCs used in sham transactions.

The first deed transfer might carry a forged signature or one obtained through deception.

Some deeds in Makhani-linked transactions bore signatures attributed to prison inmates, psychiatric patients, dementia sufferers, Puerto Rican hurricane survivors and people detectives deemed “fictitious.” A 2004 deed transferring a Harlem lot from the Negro Labor Committee to Makhani purportedly carried the signature of the group’s former president, Robert Russell. An archivist who compared it with Russell’s known 1971 signature said the two did not match. The deed listed 555-1212 — directory assistance — as a contact number.

The next problem to solve? Making the ownership look legit.

Prosecutors said Makhani often moved a property from the company tied to the questionable deed into a second LLC, distancing the new owner from the original transaction. That company could then seek a court order confirming its ownership through a quiet-title lawsuit, a legal action in which a judge resolves competing claims to a property. Anyone who may have an ownership interest is supposed to receive notice and an opportunity to appear in court.

Makhani’s companies often won by default because potential heirs or owners never appeared. Fraud expert Elizabeth Lynch testified at his recent trial that process servers sometimes delivered notices to places where the recipients did not live — including boarded-up buildings — a practice known as “sewer service.” When the former or actual owners didn’t show up, the quiet title was easily granted.

With a fresh default quiet title judgment in hand, Makhani sought out institutions willing to treat him like any other real estate investor.

To obtain \$1.2 million in mortgages on the (stolen) West 118th brownstone, Makhani turned to Flushing Bank. On his application, Makhani said he paid \$975,000 for the property, not the \$10

FRATERNALLY YOURS, <i>Robert Russell</i> ROBERT RUSSELL, PRESIDENT	THE NEGRO LABOR COMMITTEE BY <i>Robert Russell</i> Robert Russell BY <i>Daisy Houghton</i> DAISY HAUGHTON	<table border="1"> <tr> <td>LAST NAME</td> <td>FIRST NAME</td> </tr> <tr> <td>718</td> <td>555-1212</td> </tr> <tr> <td>AREA CODE</td> <td>TELEPHONE NUMBER</td> </tr> <tr> <td colspan="2">SELLER</td> </tr> <tr> <td><i>Robert Russell</i></td> <td>11/06/04</td> </tr> <tr> <td>SELLER SIGNATURE</td> <td>DATE</td> </tr> </table>	LAST NAME	FIRST NAME	718	555-1212	AREA CODE	TELEPHONE NUMBER	SELLER		<i>Robert Russell</i>	11/06/04	SELLER SIGNATURE	DATE
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Known Robert Russell 1971 signature from Negro Labor Committee records donation form (left); Deed signatures from 2004 purportedly by Russell, transferring 29 West 128th Street to Makhani (middle and right)

publicly recorded. He promised to personally guarantee the loan, noting his \$83,286,000 in assets as of 2016, court records showed.

The bank, which has lent Makhani money since at least 2002, according to public filings, faced little risk in green-lighting the money. Flushing's James Jacovatos testified that Makhani was a consistent re-payer. Plus, the bank had title insurance, paid for by Makhani. If something screwy emerged about his ownership, the bank could collect on the policy.

Once Makhani secured control of a property, he could monetize it like any other real estate investor: sell it, renovate and flip it, or borrow against its equity to fund construction or other deals.

Makhani gutted 107 West 118th, a former single-room occupancy, converting it to four market-rate rentals charging about \$3,300 per month. It's one of about 30 buildings currently owned by Makhani, testified employee Damian Junor.

Real estate salesperson Kathy Arjang-Makani is Joseph Makhani's presumed wife; she shared a home with Makhani, property records and process server affidavits show. StreetEasy shows she's also handled apartment leasing for at least 10 Makhani-tied buildings since 2023, mostly across Harlem, but also in Fort Greene and Ridgewood. She currently has three Makhani-tied properties listed for sale, according to her Weichert Properties page: an Astoria two-flat for \$1.2 million, a Sunset Park two-family home for \$999,000 and a Harlem townhouse for \$1.6 million.

Makhani has flipped dozens of properties over the past 25 years, filings show. After obtaining four separate \$0 deeds in 2002 for a Bedford-Stuyvesant three-family, Makhani's LLC sold it for \$560,000 two years later. Another example: Makhani turned a 2017 \$5,000 deed transfer into a 2018 sale for \$750,000, after first winning a quiet-title default judgment on the Jamaica, Queens, two-family building.

Legal warfare

Even when Makhani's lawsuits were challenged, opponents often ended up mired in litigation. Even court victories did not always translate into practical ones.

Take 237 Maple Street in Prospect Lefferts Gardens. Long a vacant lot, Brooklyn locals tried to contact the people behind two 148-45 Hillside Avenue LLCs that held the deed since 2003. Getting no response, they transformed it into the Maple Street Community Garden in 2012.

Two years later, Makhani showed up, bringing a crew to rip up a garden bed. One of the gardeners called the cops, The Nation reported. Police told Makhani to come back when he had a court order; he's still fighting to get one.

A judge ruled in 2015 that Makhani's 2003 deed was "of dubious validity," and the gardeners eventually persuaded the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation to purchase the parcel in a condemnation proceeding for \$2.3 million. But who would get the money?

Attorneys found true heirs of Germaine Kirton, 237 Maple's last verified owner. They called Makhani's deed "fraudulent," signed by "fictitious" heirs an expert genealogist could not confirm ever existed. In a 2025 ruling, New York Supreme Court Judge Wayne Saitta agreed.

That did not end the dispute. Makhani subsequently appealed for a 49 percent share.

His lawyers play endurance hardball. "They're like, 'You cannot fight this guy because he will crush you. He will never back down,'" said Legal Aid's Gerard Deenihan.

Deenihan represents Diane Prince, whose family encountered another branch of Makhani's legal strategy: partition lawsuits.

The scheme worked like this: Makhani purchased cut-rate deeds from multiple people, each holding partial interest in the property. This often happened when an owner died without a will, and several relatives had a claim to a share of the home via familial ties.

In Prince's case, Makhani paid \$136,000 for deeds granting him a 75 percent stake in her family's \$695,000 Queens home of 55 years. Then Makhani sued, aiming to force Prince into buying him out for \$500,000. Barring that, he demanded rent as a co-owner but never paid any maintenance or taxes, filings said.

Prince won the initial lawsuit, and

New York later banned such partition actions in 2024.

But the fight didn't end.

Makhani remains, on paper, a 75 percent owner. He's now decided to play landlord, deploying a novel tactic: get someone to sign a lease, then demand the Princes let a stranger live in their home.

Slow road to justice

It's unclear when Makhani started working his deed-theft strategy. But a review of 184 Makhani-tied properties found deeds recorded as early as 2001 showing him paying nothing for some acquisitions, including a Brooklyn three-family house.

Makhani's 1998 bid-rigging conviction was the first of several law-enforcement encounters over the years, but none stopped the fraud.

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GERARD DEENIHAN,
LEGAL AID, ON MAKHANI'S
LEGAL TEAM

In 2007, the Queens District Attorney charged Makhani and three of his LLCs with multiple deed-related crimes. His attorney, a former president of the Queens County Bar Association, helped get Makhani's charges dropped. The LLCs pleaded guilty to falsifying business records, and paid \$15,000 in fines. By then, Makhani's LLCs had already sold the properties for \$1.2 million, Newsday reported.

In 2013, a Harlem-based contractor named Bill Rohlfing called 311, concerned about his elderly neighbor, Veronica Palmer, and strange filings recorded on her West 118th Street brownstone, Rohlfing said. His findings would later become key trial exhibits in Attorney General Letitia James' prosecution case.

In 2015, the Attorney General's office was already looking at Makhani for a scheme involving his attempts to

fraudulently claim "abandoned funds" from dormant bank accounts, court records said. As they dug deeper, they uncovered his web of deed transfers.

Six years later, a grand jury indicted Makhani for the Harlem brownstones theft. A seven-week trial led to his 2026 conviction. Necheles said she expects Makhani will win on appeal. His sentencing is scheduled for September.

Makhani may be headed to prison, but the mechanics that made his scheme possible have not disappeared. State law still requires the City Register to record any deed that arrives in complete, recordable form.

"If you're willing to be a criminal and put forward fraudulent papers, you can pretty much get title to anything, real-estate wise," observed residential attorney Gordon Remer.

And, his playbook kept rolling even as Makhani's trial date approached.

According to court records, Makhani hadn't attended his old collaborator Charles Simon's funeral when he died in 2014. But soon after, he sued Simon and his heirs to get them to close on a 2013 deal Simon supposedly made to sell his Queens bungalow for \$150,000.

Only after Makhani scored a default judgment did Simon's children lawyer up, saying they'd never been served the lawsuit. Simon's daughters testified the sales contract was "bogus" and "a forgery." Makhani firehosed Simon's estate, filing an additional \$1.35 million suit citing Simon's "fraud."

Simon's family eventually stopped showing up to court, and Makhani won another default judgment ordering the New York City Sheriff's Office to execute a deed. Filings show a purchase price of \$10.

In the winter of 2026, the home, at 7315 170th Street in Fresh Meadows, was listed, removed, then listed again, according to Zillow. Weichert real estate agent Kathy Arjang-Makani was the seller's agent, according to the StreetEasy page.

Just weeks before Makhani's trial was due to begin, the seller accepted an offer, per Zillow.

Then, on July 9, the week after a jury found Joseph Makhani guilty and a judge remanded him to jail, the deal, for \$1.3 million, closed. **TRD**