

Posted on Thu, Oct. 11, 2007

Stu Bykofsky | In some families, is criminal enterprise the tie that binds?
OVER THE RIVER AND THROUGH THE WOODS, TO GRANDMOTHER'S HEIST WE GO

THERE WAS no sweeter way for me to spend the day, growing up, than with Granny.
We might play "war" with a battered red deck of Bicycle cards, or we might warm up the Philco and listen to the radio, or we might fry a batch of tasty, greasy *latkes* . . . or we might go shoplifting.
One day it's the 5 & 10, the next day it's S. Klein, and then we're off to Pep Boys to swipe a heavy chain for the two-wheeler we stole a week earlier.

I couldn't wait to be old enough to go out and hot-wire cars with Granny.

While my escapades with Granny are fiction, I wonder, given events in Upper Darby: What greater bond between the generations can there be than a criminal enterprise?
Share the same DNA? Share the same criminal M.O., too.

In another era, the glue binding the generations might have been love of music, or love of art, or love of food, or love of country. Today, it's the love of the five-fingered discount - if charges against Upper Darby's Monica Vitale are true.

As her alleged theft is on videotape, it looks bad for the whale-like, bleached-blond, tattooed Granny. Yeah, that's name-calling and this allegedly corrupt, evil hag deserves it for snaring an innocent child. Vitale could be a character out of Charles Dickens.

Her arrest made the news and the Net because it seems so improbable. It - almost - reached the level of interest captured in July by a seagull with the habit of pinching a daily bag of Doritos from a Scottish shop.

The seagull didn't know any better - and didn't bring along a baby.

What was Granny thinking?

I can't ask Vitale, 42, because she's locked up and can't make the \$25,000 bail. So I talk with others.

The crime is unusual "because grandparents usually have a little more sense about what's appropriate," says Capt. John Apeldorn, a retired Philly cop who now leads the Citizens Crime Commission.

Shoplifting might seem small when weighed against Philadelphia's homicide rate, but you have to ask yourself if there are any limits any more.

Maybe there are things more vile than what Vitale did. Using a child as a shield in battle, or as a drug runner, or for sex, are worse. But trying to rank crimes against innocence just stinks.

A few weeks earlier, down the Shore, a grandfather was busted for using his granddaughter to snatch a purse.

Is this a trend?

Grandparents using grandchildren for crime is a "growing trend throughout the country" by sociopathic grandparents, Elkins Park psychotherapist Dr. Steve Rosenberg tells me.

Upper Darby Police Superintendent Michael Chitwood says it's unusual but not unknown in his 43-year law-enforcement career. "A grandmother's supposed to be teaching their granddaughters how to bake cookies, how to play with dolls," he says. "This particular grandmother is taking her granddaughter to steal."

Vitale reportedly jumped a generation. She has a record, but the 4-year-old's mother is employed, "devastated" and "angry" her mother dragged her daughter into crime, says Chitwood.

Rosenberg says Vitale was evilly deliberate, using the child to deflect suspicion and to avoid apprehension.

It's hard to imagine grandparents teaching grandchildren to steal. As elders, they often lay down the rules by which we run our lives.

When they go bad, they must be denied contact with kids, says Rosenberg.

The cops agree. Don't you? *

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