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NOVEMBER 15, 2012 LOS ANGELES, CA

Head of former Los Angeles law firm sentenced for visa fraud scam Defendant forfeits vacant cemetery plots, grave markers bought with illegal profits from scheme

LOS ANGELES — The onetime head of a now defunct Los Angeles law firm was sentenced Thursday to 10 months in prison for his role in orchestrating a lengthy employment visa fraud scheme where the illicit profits were used to purchase several hundred thousand dollars' worth of vacant cemetery plots and grave monuments.

Joseph Wai-Man Wu, 53, former president of the East West Law Group, pleaded guilty in August 2011 to one count of conspiracy to commit visa fraud, one count of money laundering and one count of obstruction of justice. As part of a plea agreement reached in February, Wu surrendered a portion of his profits derived from the visa fraud scheme, forfeiting to the government 30 vacant cemetery plots and 20 grave monuments, all of which were purchased with proceeds from the scam. Wu used the cemetery plot purchasing scheme to launder some of the money he unlawfully obtained through the visa fraud scheme. The grave plots will now be sold at public auction and the proceeds given to the U.S. Treasury.

Wu's sentencing is the latest development in a 2 ½-year investigation by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) that also involved the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of the Inspector General, and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services' (USCIS) Fraud Detection and National Security Unit.

In pleading guilty, Wu admitted that, from approximately 1996 to 2009, he and other members of the law practice set up nearly a dozen shell companies in order to file at least 137 fraudulent employment-based visa petitions for nearly 100 alien clients. In return for filing those fraudulent petitions, the clients paid Wu and his co-conspirators anywhere from \$6,000 to \$50,000. Many of the petitions were for H-1B visas, which the government reserves for foreign workers with specialized skills, such as accountants and information technology professionals. Authorities say the aliens named in those visa applications never worked for the defendants or the fictitious companies.

"Our agents encounter a lot of unusual money laundering schemes, but this is the first time we've come across a case where the suspects sought to bury their profits by buying cemetery plots," said Claude Arnold, special agent in charge for HSI Los Angeles. "As this case makes clear, HSI will go where ever the evidence takes us to ensure that those who compromise the integrity of the visa process are held accountable for their crimes."

The other two defendants charged in the case were Kelly Einstein Darwin Giles, 49, the only attorney at the former East West Law Group, and Wu's wife, May Yim-man Wu, 46. Giles, who pleaded guilty Sept. 19 to conspiracy to commit visa fraud and obstruction of justice, is scheduled to be sentenced Jan. 17, 2013. May Wu, who played a minor role in the conspiracy, is participating in a pretrial diversion program.

Prosecutors say the case represents the first time in the Central District of California where federal investigators uncovered a scheme involving the purchase and sale of cemetery plots as a means to launder criminal proceeds. While the situation is highly unusual, funeral professionals claim grave sites appreciate at a rate of up to 10 percent a year and are less susceptible to economic downturns than other types of real estate.

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U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) is the largest investigative arm of the Department of Homeland Security.

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