

Prison term after \$450,000 gambling-fuelled fraud

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A Waimea Nurseries employee stole \$450,000 from the company to fund a gambling habit and pay for trips to follow sporting events in Australia and New Zealand.

Darren Lindsay Thomason, 36, appeared for sentencing in the Nelson District Court yesterday after earlier admitting a charge of theft by a person in a special relationship.

He was sentenced to three years' jail and ordered to pay a further \$50,000 reparation on top of the \$100,000 he had already paid.

Thomason is a cricket and hockey umpire in Nelson and worked in wineries in Marlborough, before moving to Nelson.

Judge Tony Zohrab said Thomason was employed by Waimea Nurseries from May 2009 to June this year as the company's finance officer.

Thomason was responsible for the company's finance and IT and worked unsupervised.

It was his responsibility to do the banking and financial transactions. He had authority to do internet banking.

Judge Zohrab said Thomason started to steal money from July 2009, and continued to take money until he was dismissed. Because of the degree of trust in him, he managed to transfer \$436,610 over that time into his bank account.

Judge Zohrab said Thomason had also admitted putting \$19,000 on a travel card, and travelled in Australia and New Zealand to attend sporting events and casinos.

He also admitted paying for some of his friends' travel on the card.

To cover his steps, Thomason had to take all sorts of other steps and the implication of those were being uncovered.

Judge Zohrab said he had victim impact statements from people involved in the business and they described an extraordinary breach of trust, violation and betrayal.

The current economic climate was difficult, and to learn Thomason was stealing to fund his lifestyle of gambling addiction was difficult for them to comprehend.

Thomason had started gambling 15 years ago and became a heavy gambler five years ago.

His offending had a significant effect on shareholders and directors and the consequences of his offending would be felt for the rest of their lives.

"I'm sure they have real difficulty in accepting your expression of remorse," the judge said.

"I'm sure any expression of remorse is incredibly difficult for them to swallow."

Thomason's employers had to pay accountants to go through their accounts so they accurately reflected what was going on, and there were implications on the GST, fringe benefits and other taxes. He hoped the IRD would be sympathetic to the company.

Thomason had come up with \$20,000 reparation and his mother had come up with a further \$80,000, Judge Zohrab said.

Any further reparation he ordered had to be realistically be able to be paid within five years, he said.

Thomason had limited ability to come up with further reparation.

Thomason's lawyer, Craig Stevenson, said Thomason's employment gave him the opportunity to indulge in gambling to quite a significant degree well beyond his income. Thomason did not accept all the money had gone on gambling.

Thomason had taken himself to see a gambling counsellor the day before his employment was terminated.

He was remorseful. Mr Stevenson said there was talk of a lavish lifestyle, but he had only seen one stamp for one trip Thomason's passport.

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