

Mastering Money Podcast

Season 9 – Dark side of money

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S9 E05: Protecting Your Castle – Safeguarding Against Fraudulent Property Sales

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DORETTA THOMPSON

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Hi. You're listening to Mastering Money, where we explore the many aspects of good financial decision-making. I'm Doretta Thompson, financial literacy leader for Chartered Professional Accountants of Canada. We provide no-cost programs and free online resources that help Canadians own their finances and learn the language of money.

This season, we're looking at the dark side of money. We'll be diving into hot button topics, like how romance scams target vulnerable people, how we can protect ourselves and deal with the aftermath of robbery with the sharp increase in street crimes, to the fraudulent property sales that jeopardize our homes.

Today we're looking at something more and more in the headlines, mortgage fraud, and the fraudulent sales of residential properties. We'll be exploring how these fraudsters work and how you can protect yourself, and our guest today is the perfect person to explore this. Not only is Jennifer Fiddian-Green, a forensic accountant and a partner in the forensic practice of Grant Thornton, she has actually experienced mortgage fraud firsthand. Jennifer, welcome to Mastering Money.

JENNIFER FIDDIAN-GREEN

00:01:22.64

So pleased to be here and share my story and talk about this with you, Doretta.

DORETTA THOMPSON

00:01:28.34

Before we dive right in, can you just tell me a little bit about your career. What exactly is a forensic accountant? What do you do? And how did you end up in this place?

JENNIFER FIDDIAN-GREEN

00:01:39.56

I love what I do, and I hope there's more and more of us that love what we do. So it's a long time ago now, but I went and got my CA at the time, CPA. So I'm a chartered professional accountant. And then I got this opportunity to work, and it ended up being for two full years. I worked inside an RCMP, a Royal Canadian Mounted Police unit.

So I worked in a unit with a group of investigators who followed the money on criminal cases. So not the white collar fraud so much, although that's super important. It was criminal cases, and I got to follow the money on all of these cases. So that was my introduction to forensic accounting. And I came back to the firm after those two years, and I lead today. I lead a forensics practice. We do fraud investigations. We follow the money. We do money laundering investigations. That's what we do.

DORETTA THOMPSON

00:02:35.04

And how fascinating is that? And also, how incredibly ironic that somebody with your expertise actually had this happen to them in terms of your mortgage. Tell me about that story.

JENNIFER FIDDIAN-GREEN

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So it's a long time ago now, but it still has really good legs to share this. So it happened to me — the very first trigger of this, I was at work. I was sitting in an office, Downtown Toronto, working away, and I got a call, and this was an individual. The person's name was Jeff, I remember. I remember him very clearly. I ended up meeting him.

And he was calling me because he was trying to figure out — he was trying to track me down and figure out why I wasn't making my mortgage payment. You're just flabbergasted when this happens because you're doing your job, you're in your day-to-day, and then this thing comes out of the blue. You get nervous. I was getting angry. You get upset. All of these — it's very emotional. You get this call.

And he's quite good at his job. He was a younger guy, but he knew what he had to do, and he was tracking me down. And pretty blunt language, he said, lady, you're not paying your mortgage, and you can't live with this kind of debt. You've got to pay your mortgage. And my CPA hat turned on. My fraud antenna went up. And I got some information and I wrote it down and I got off the phone. A couple of big breaths now, and like, what the hell was going on? What's going on that I'm getting this kind of call?

And something you and I are going to talk about today, I quickly — because I got the address from him. I said, what property are you calling me about? I don't owe you any money. My husband and I, we'd been married for a few years, and we did have a property that we lived in and we paid a mortgage. We knew we were making our mortgage payments.

So when I got off the phone with him, I went and got the land registry document for that property that he told me about. And let's talk about a land registry document. This is — for me as an investigator, it's a pretty important piece of paper. At the time, it was a piece of paper. Now it's data. We can get them electronic. I think of it as evidence on a file. I think that this is as truth on a file. Whatever's in there, this is going to be credible important information.

So I got the land registry document for the property that he was calling me about, and I'm looking at the details, Doretta, and it says that me, Jennifer Fiddian-Green, owned this property. I never heard of this property. It was located in Branford, Ontario. And then right underneath, it says, Jennifer Fiddian-Green went and got a mortgage for a big amount of money, hundreds of thousands of dollars, and owed this money in relation to this property. Stunned.

So all of this came. He was calling me. He was at the end of the third month of the mortgage lending company not getting their money. So they're starting to get serious, right. The person who they lent wasn't paying the money. So you're just like, oh, a couple of big breaths. And everything I was going to do that day — none of it got done.

So I hope it's something you and I will talk about because as all of this has happened with me not knowing anything, suddenly, all the weight of it felt like it was on my shoulder, and that's a problem that we got to talk about and we got to figure this out better as a society. What are we doing that an individual is feeling and carrying all the weight of this coordinated fraud, and a completely innocent individual. I mean, this is being done without your knowledge, your consent. This is out of the blue.

So I got pretty upset with this guy. So I ended up calling him back and I turned my fraud investigator, my forensic accountant hat on. And I ended up meeting him in a few days at the offices of the mortgage lending company because I wanted to know what was going on. What do they say about accountants? You shouldn't do your own accounting. You should probably not investigate your own case because you're way too emotionally involved. So I agree with that 100%.

But at the time, I didn't have an option. There was nobody I could go hire to do this for me. First of all, that was going to cost way too much money. So I was in, and it was a very emotional investigation for me. So I met him at the offices, and it took us a little while to figure out — we were both sort of checking each other out. What's going on here? To figure out that we were both on the same side of this. We were both victims in this.

And I'm going to fast forward a little bit, but the big thing, the thread through this that I figured out — and I looked at him at one point and I said, well, how all of this happened? I wasn't involved. So why are you calling me now? Why did he call me, the real me, and said, where's the money? Well, I wasn't involved in any of the signing. I didn't do anything. So why was he calling me and how did he find me?

And he said to me, very honestly at the time — he said, Jennifer, I don't even think it took me 20 seconds to find you. And I was like — I was floored. He said, I put you in Google. I put you in the search engine. I figured out where you worked and I called you where you worked, I had you on the phone. OK, well, why didn't you do that at the very beginning before you lent the money?

And that's kind of the full circle that we as professionals — we need to be thinking about this. We need to be thinking zooming out of these situations and really thinking about what's going on here, and we need all the parties involved to be smarter about this kind of stuff.

DORETTA THOMPSON

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Right. So you were able to establish, and I guess, get him to believe that you were totally uninvolved in this. So how did they do it? How did that happen?

JENNIFER FIDDIAN-GREEN

00:08:32.31

So he wasn't willing to immediately believe me. So I showed up at that meeting with my passport and my driver's license. I knew who I was. And he had a big file, Doretta, and he'd printed it out. I remember it was a blue file folder. And I don't think it was an inch, but it was at least a half inch. There was all this paper in there.

And he showed me the photocopies of the identity documents that they had used, that they had received for a Jennifer Fiddian-Green in the lending of this mortgage. The identity documents that I had in my hand, they were all fake. It's all fake. They did have some real information for me, and that's why this story — it's complicated, right? And that's what makes it scary for us. It's got links to the identity theft, all the breaches we're hearing about, all of our data out there.

So this file that he, they had my real name, and they had my real social insurance number. Somehow, they got that. But everything else, my address, even how they were spelling my name, the Fiddian-Green, they didn't have in the middle. They put it together without a space. Everything else was fake.

There were three years of income tax filings for a Jennifer Fiddian-Green who was a self-employed accountant. And all the numbers were fake. They were all filled out in detail. And what he and I talked about was how easy it is to fake those documents. None of them were mine. And if only maybe we lived in a world where the lending organization could say, I've got all these documents that went to the CRA. Could I check them with the CRA?

Do we live in that kind of World where I could just call them up and find out if they're real or not? We don't. It's not easy to do that. We protect our privacy. So where I worked, all of the numbers on the documents, they were all fake. So I was able to show him once I showed him my passport and my driver's license that I was not that person who was in the file, somebody was using my name to access the money that his company lent, the money that went in.

DORETTA THOMPSON

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Were you ever able to figure out how they got your social insurance number?

JENNIFER FIDDIAN-GREEN

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So this part I spent a lot of time on it. I think I spent at least a couple hours investigating my case and trying to learn all of the details, but I never figured this part out definitively. But my investigation journey took me to a whole bunch of different groups, different law enforcement groups that were really honing in and targeting on these crimes. It took me to the credit agencies. So lots of groups.

So I was told — some of the things I learned was, at the time — and it's changed a little bit over the years, but it's still quite valid, the thinking around this. I was told that some employees inside financial services — so you think of banks or different finance companies, were being targeted to say, hey, you can make some money, \$5,000, \$10,000. You need to take pictures of what's on your screen at work, come back, bring the images to me, names, social insurance numbers. So that might have been one way that they got it.

I also learned that one of the credit agencies had a data breach, and I was inside there. So that could have been it. And I was also told that it could have been as simple as, when the mail sent from Canada Revenue Agency to all of our different mailboxes — remember when it used to go in there, and our social insurance number, the details could be in there. Now today, all of that it's masked.

And mailing to us is not as easily identifiable. So it's less likely to be stolen, but that kind of activity is still happening today. So what I learned around INAUDIBLE that there was at least a short list of maybe five or six ways that could have been stolen, but I never actually figured out.

DORETTA THOMPSON

00:12:31.42

Interesting. So what happened next once they figured out that and believed that you're not this person, this has been fake? So now it is not you who are the victim, at least financially. It is now the lending institution that's the victim.

JENNIFER FIDDIAN-GREEN

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So if we think about this — so what's going on? It's actually the lending institution, the company that provided the mortgage that ended up on the land registry document that triggered all of this. So that mortgage company is the one that's trying to get paid back. So the financial victim — they are the financial victim.

And in my case, a little bit more complicated, this guy Jeff was calling me about one property and one mortgage. When I pulled those land registry documents, I found out that this — and I believe it was an organized criminal group, there was two properties in my name, a mortgage on each of them. So two mortgages. So one mortgage was Jeff's company, and the other mortgage was another group.

So the total amount was over \$500,000 that had been lent to properties that my name was attached to. And so the financial loss to these two different companies tallied about \$500,000. So I would call myself, and I would want to support everyone — we get these sensationalized headlines, the victims are on the hook for the money. I'd want to support everyone to be an informed victim, an informed confident victim.

So this company, Jeff's company, is looking for me to — OK, we want our mortgage paid back. No, I wasn't a part of this. You lent the money, and what can I do to help you in a process? But I'm not making you whole on any losses. I've had nothing to do with that.

And so sometimes having the confidence to understand your role and what's gone on versus being pulled into something because the weight of all the administration and the paperwork — it's not fair what happens to the personal victim here whose name was used, even though we're not the financial victim.

DORETTA THOMPSON

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So what period of time did this happen over, from the time they took out these mortgages to the time — did they ever pay any mortgage payment or did this all happen in like six months? Did you ever figure that out?

JENNIFER FIDDIAN-GREEN

00:15:00.41

In my case, as I investigated deeper, I found out that there was about three days of activity where my name was used to apply for all of these different mortgages. They actually applied for about 12 different mortgages and two were successful. So there's this coordinated activity, flurry of activity over a period of time. And then once the mortgage money was lent, it was three months later that they came looking to me.

But this is a bit dated now. Let's fast forward to really current, Doretta, because I'm aware of a case where — this is where we have to understand how smart these fraudsters are and coordinated. They're savvy. I went to work. I had my day job. I was doing what I do. They're coming to work focused on this, and they are organized and they got the means and the resources. So let's walk through this one.

So same kind of fraud, and that we've got fraudsters, organized criminals, using, whether it's fully fake identity or stolen identity to prepare applications. They go to the mortgage lending companies and they get the money land. It goes into lawyers trust accounts. We can talk about that afterwards. But what if the money goes into the account and the fraudsters are savvy enough to leave enough money?

They don't steal all of it. They leave enough money in the account to make the first full year of mortgage payments, so 12 mortgage payments. They leave the money in the account so that the mortgage company says, OK, I'm getting paid, I'm getting paid, I'm getting paid. And then we get to the 13th month, and there's no more money left.

So the fraudsters have had a whole year to get away from that crime, to distance themselves, and the lender has no idea. And now they're saying, OK, well, I still got four years of payments, then I'm out. I've lost a whole bunch of money. I want to go find the fraudsters. I want to go find the — but they're gone because they've had a whole year to run away from it and distance themselves. This is what we're up against. This is how savvy it is.

DORETTA THOMPSON

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So I'm curious about — if we go back to your own story, what did it do to you personally? What did it do? I would assume it would have an impact on your credit score. It would affect your ability to say, you actually wanted to borrow some money yourself for a legitimate purpose. How did that affect you? And how long did it take to get that straightened out?

JENNIFER FIDDIAN-GREEN

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This is the part which I think we don't understand well enough unless it happens to you. So my credit score was impacted. There were two lenders who had lent money to my name who weren't getting paid. So that was going to come up on my credit score, that I had bad debt. And the reason my name was used by the fraudsters was because I had good credit.

I had good credit. Like most of us, I paid my debts, I think. My husband and I were actually working on paying off our mortgage, and we had credit card accounts. So it took me hundreds of hours to investigate this. And I don't think everybody should need to investigate it. And today we've got all these different tools and resources that help us. Most of them cost money. So we can talk about that later, like, who should be paying for that?

But at the time when this happened to me, those kinds of resources weren't really available. So then once I got out of the investigating what happened, I got into the, OK, how do I clean up my credit? What do I do here? And there are two major credit agencies, the Equifax and TransUnion, and you let both of them know, I'm a victim of fraud, and you fill out the forms, and you can get fraud alerts on your file, and you can do all sorts of good stuff.

And I would correct the data. I would correct things because that — remember that file folder I told you about that Jeff had and it was blue and he had all the data? So there was employer information and my occupation. There was address information. All of that that was fake — it was false — it had all been updated into my credit files because the lender had gotten the information, and then it gets updated into these databases.

So I went through the process of working with each of them and saying, there's been something fraudulent, so I'm going to correct all the data and I'd get it all corrected. And then what I realized — and I didn't I didn't know any of this before. And for all of us as CPAs and financial professionals, if we think about it, we actually do know this.

As a good CPA and a fraud investigator, say, OK, I've done all this work. I've corrected things. I'll go pull the documents again from Equifax and TransUnion, and I'll check that everything is good now. So I did that. I'm like, what? It's all still wrong. What's going on? It's wrong.

So now I'm dealing with them and they're saying, well, you corrected it with us. But because your false information is in all those other places that the fraudsters tried to apply to, they took your information to all of these other places. Every time we update these as a credit agency, we go out and we gather the information from all of these places. Our database is live. It's dynamic. It's a really cool thing. It gets updated. You actually got to go correct it in all those other places.

So now I'm getting pretty upset now because this is — what? I wanted them to do that, and they're like, no, no, no, they can't change those records. And this is why I had so many hours invested in the investigation. So now I started to go hunt down. I investigated. I went to all the places that I could find that these fraudsters had taken my information to to try to go access money.

And so I found these 10 other mortgage lending companies — they're all mortgage lending companies, and I followed my information. I followed it there. So you might say, Doretta — you say, well, how the heck did you know? Those credit files that we have for each one of us, if we pull the Equifax and TransUnion, they actually keep records for us, and they tell me — I could see it said, OK, Jennifer Fiddian-Green credit file was accessed by this company, this company, this company, this company.

So I had a list in each one of those records, and for me, it was the Equifax database that had been used the most. And I could see the names of all of these companies, and I had a date when they'd gone into my file. And I said, well, I don't know anything about these companies, so it wasn't me doing it. It must have been the fraudsters taking it.

So I went and called each one of them, and I found the person inside that company who had had an application with my name at the top of it. And what was really, really interesting is that these are all the ones that I'm chasing now who said, no, they weren't going to lend money. Jeff's company lent money, but these other ones said, no.

So as a CPA, as a forensic accountant, I was like, why did they say no? And I thought, well, maybe the fraudsters, this is who they had gone to first and the application wasn't so good, they had to fix it. But I found out it wasn't in date order. There were some that had — it wasn't just about the fraudsters making my application better and better. Some of the mortgage lending companies had better processes to weed out fraud.

And so that got me really interested. So what can a company do? What should a company do to figure out, this isn't a good application, this is a bad one, versus these other companies that didn't catch. They didn't catch the red flags. They didn't catch the signals. So I was in deep, as you can tell.

My husband and I were living in a loft condominium at the time, and we had a big island in the middle of our living area, and I had all — my whole case spread out like I was pursuing. And these fraudsters had gone across the country, Doretta. They were applying for money in my name in Vancouver, in Alberta, in Ontario. So I was working the different time zones. So I'd work all day, and I'd come home, and then I was making calls at 9:00 at night to try to figure all this out. Yeah, it was a lot.

DORETTA THOMPSON

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It is just crazy. And think about what I might do to this when they can start doing this stuff automatically and applying — I'm assuming that back then they would have done individual applications. But if you can just do mass applications and find any gap in the system.

JENNIFER FIDDIAN-GREEN

00:23:47.18

Yes, yes, it's scary, right? And we need to balance this out with the kind of thinking, and protections, and — I don't want it to be overly, but the kind of processes that — we need to understand that accessing the money, it can't be too easy.

So what they did using my name, they had the data, and then they found a process that had some weak gaps in it. They had weak links, whether that was people, whether that was the actual written out process they had, and they targeted it. They attacked it, and they went in, and the goal was the money.

DORETTA THOMPSON

00:24:25.54

How do we, though, look at the institutions that are responsible for protecting us.

JENNIFER FIDDIAN-GREEN

00:24:34.69

Oh, such a good question. Coming out of this, I tried to have views and thinking on all of the different institutions, or the players, the roles that are involved in this, and there's quite a few, actually. This is not a simple crime to orchestrate. It's complicated. And for those groups that are successful at it, it's why it's a challenge for us to stop it head on, right, because this is quite complex. It's orchestrated.

So when I think about the institutions that are lending the money, I think about how those groups — and they are the financial victim. We have to recognize that. We've got to know that. But there are also the groups that have the most control in the whole process, I believe.

And there is this process — this crime is to a certain — I want to use the word preventable. I'm putting that in finger quotes a little bit because we've got very ambitious fraudsters that are targeting us. And we shouldn't have to be responsible for preventing crime. But those mortgage lenders, Doretta, they have the power, they have the control because they have the money.

So I need them as an individual who lives in our society to have a process that is doing all that it can do reasonably to identify and respond to indicators of fraud and unusual on those files. That guy, Jeff, gave it away. He said, I found you in 20 seconds.

So if you've got an application for somebody in their name and you don't have a process that independently reaches out to make sure you're dealing with the individual, then that's a weakness, that's a vulnerability, and we actually know how to fix that, but it does take some time. Time cost money, and you need people who are trained and aware.

So mortgage lenders, that's one group. I think about the — who do we want to go to next, the institutions that are involved? I think about the land registry companies. This is where what we're seeing today is a bit different than what was in my story, my case. But what we're seeing today is people who live in their homes. They've cleared title. They've paid off their mortgage. They've spent a long time, or they've used their family wealth to buy their home.

So they own it free and clear. We're all proud of that. And we're seeing criminal groups target that clear title, and they're going out without the homeowners involved and they're getting a mortgage and they're putting it. And then suddenly, the homeowner is saying, what? And we're getting all these terrible headlines. Is there something that they — if we think about institutions, that was your question, the land registry, offices, we need to help those groups stand up and say, hey, there's something going on here.

It's like — I've never actually thought of it this way before, but those credit files that we get — you and I each have a credit file. It's been years now, but in the very beginning, we didn't have the activity of who was accessing our credit pushed to us. Well, that's now available to us as consumers, right. Sometimes we have to pay for it.

We never had the opportunity to put a fraud alert on our file. Now we do. We've had that for a little while. So there's a way that we can protect that. Well, we need lots of good ways to protect our property title. So we have things like title insurance. I think we can even put on some other kinds of alerts.

What I take a little bit of pause to — I don't know if I want to use the word offense, is that I'm still in a world where I have to pay for that title insurance, and I'm not so sure that I feel like I should have to pay for that to protect myself from fraud, that I want other people to take some accountability for along with me, not just me.

DORETTA THOMPSON

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Another point that you mentioned and I think might be a potential point, which is interesting, is the lawyers who have the money going into their trust companies, or their trust funds. There was a case that was widely reported fairly recently of one of the ones where people had title free — they owned their house mortgage free. They were away for a few months, and the fraudsters sold the house to somebody else who — of course, they didn't own it.

But in that case, it was really interesting saying because the lawyer just had this feeling that there's just something really wrong and that he was being asked to attest to the identity, and it came out that way. So what is the responsibility there?

JENNIFER FIDDIAN-GREEN

00:29:11.30

Yes So there's another group. There's another role. We need them to do what that lawyer did. I remember that story. That one was a little bit unique. So I think I have a bit of a view or a lens on this, that really, the organized crime groups are going to use a lawyer who's not going to be aware and call this as offside because the lawyer will be involved in that.

So perhaps a message is, because there's so many other parties, like the mortgage lenders, like the land registry offices, we need to know that the people involved are reputable individuals who are, if we're talking about lawyers, licensed lawyers, we're talking about mortgage brokers, talking about real estate agents, we've now got regulation and oversight to those groups.

We need to make sure that the transaction, whether it's mortgage lending or a property sale, is involving people who are a part of these regulated groups and they're good professionals, right, they're professionals.

So yes, if a lawyer is involved, we need to help that lawyer be aware. We need them to be educated and informed. And the hard part is that the tips and the tricks that the fraudsters are using, they change it up all the time. So it's not about learning one thing. It's about learning that you need to be aware of the number of things that could be off. So thank goodness for that lawyer calling that one out.

DORETTA THOMPSON

00:30:37.91

Absolutely. So think about — I mean, I think it was really fascinating. You mentioned before that in your case, the fraudsters tried it a dozen times, were successful twice, and 10 times, other companies rejected it. What are the kind of red flags — and now I'm asking you to put on your forensic accountant hat because we're looking systemically rather than what the individual person can do. What are the kind of red flags they should be looking for.

JENNIFER FIDDIAN-GREEN

00:31:05.52

So I learned a little bit in this case that mortgage lenders, they have a process. We need to approve credit, and they go through an underwriting process. There is layers to all of this and there's detail. So some of the individuals that I got a chance to talk to — and at the time, it was audio phone calls. We didn't have screens. So I never saw them on screen.

When you got this application, what was it that you identified or you were uncomfortable with that you denied and said, no, we're not going to lend to this. And so some of what I learned was — and I loved this part of it. I love that the individual in that role who was attuned — and I often talk about an investigative mindset, who was bringing that thinking to the role was pretty easily able to find a number of indicators in my file — not my file, their file was using my name that they didn't let it go through.

And then if there was an individual in the role and I say this with some respect for the process and the number of people who were involved who hadn't been given the chance to be aware or attuned to what fraud could look like. Well, then it's just a process and they're ticking the boxes and they're putting it through.

And I ended up working with one of the financial companies to build — you've heard of a credit scoring checklist. Well, we need a fraud scoring checklist. Let's score this one for fraud. And to the extent that I was able to help one of the companies a little bit, I think that there's been a lot of that kind of thinking now embedded into the process. So we're getting better at that.

So some of the things in my case, if you think of the indicators, this self-employed accountant, the name Jennifer Fiddian-Green who was in the file, one of the underwriters was saying, OK, so I want the financial statements of this self-employed forensic accountant. I don't want just the tax returns you've given me. I want the financial statements. And the fraudsters who were working my application, they didn't have financial statements prepared. They only had the tax returns prepared.

So the woman, she said, if this person as a real accountant, they would have had financials prepared. So it didn't make sense to her, the logic, so she denied it. So that was one of the interesting things. So it's about the specifics of the case and leaning in.

DORETTA THOMPSON

00:33:29.09

Right. But it's also, I guess, about a mindset that the people doing the approving have to have to be actively looking for those inconsistencies, some of which might be quite small, and I guess it's the fraudsters get more and more sophisticated. They learned how to work that system.

JENNIFER FIDDIAN-GREEN

00:33:50.06

Absolutely. And then, Doretta, what you said, how much of this is in the hands of individuals versus, we're going to automate it now. So if the fraudsters can automate it and put it through, let's work hundreds of these at a time, our institutions need systems that are smart and looking for this. And we know how to do this.

You and I, we talked a little bit about how — if you think about our credit cards and our debit cards and we call them and we say, hey, I'm traveling over to Eastern Europe, or wherever I'm going, and I need you to know so you don't block my credit card, and that's because the systems are built in ways to look for spending that doesn't make sense based on your norm.

So these are smart systems. That kind of thinking, we need that embedded in all of these other kinds of products so that we can look for the red flags. So if there's an application for Jennifer Fiddian-Green who, there's some data out there that she lives and works in Toronto, why is she buying a property in this part of Ontario?

Might have good reasons, but we should follow up on that before we just process the application and say, approve, approve. So in my case, it didn't make sense that the location. So that's data that automated systems could respond to.

DORETTA THOMPSON

00:35:07.04

And as you said, it's really interesting that the investigators at the other end who want the mortgage paid back can find you in 20 seconds, but the people who authorized all that money against your name, they didn't find you. It's quite fascinating, isn't it?

JENNIFER FIDDIAN-GREEN

00:35:23.06

So the application that the fraudsters are working, it's got name. Here's my contact details. Here's my telephone. Here's my email. But all of that information is sourced from the criminal group. So this is where we need our people who are approving. We need the process, whether it's the technology, to say, OK, we're using this person's name and credit. We got to go find them independently.

We got to go find the real information related to Jennifer, and this can be done. We can do this today. They found me — and that was maybe that was old school, through a phone call. But this can be done, and we've got to have that built in and embedded into the processes. And every time — you and I chatted a little bit about this, but every time the process — we add a little bit more, or we make it more difficult for the fraudsters, we also make it a bit harder for those of us when everything's fine.

It gets a little bit more cumbersome to go get a mortgage, and you've got to do this and that, and we got multifactor authentication, and we got — it feels a lot, but there is good reason as to why we're doing it. And we need smart people to build systems to make it easier for us in a good way.

DORETTA THOMPSON

00:36:40.71

So we talked about the systemic issues that are involved here, and I think that it's really important to distinguish that these are the kinds of things that can happen to you that are really outside of your control. There are bad players who are very systematic trying to break into find flaws in systems, et cetera. But let's think about it from an individual perspective for a minute.

Is there anything that we can do as individuals to make it less likely that we would be targeted, or that our homes would be targeted? Is there anything that we can do ourselves or that we can notice something's going on as early as possible so that we can intervene and try to protect ourselves?

JENNIFER FIDDIAN-GREEN

00:37:30.83

So yes. Yes, I think there is. It was shared with me a little while ago, and this is coming from the law enforcement perspective based on their experience when they see these cases. So if you're a criminal group and you're looking and you're working up 10 properties to target and go after, the ones that have clear title are probably easier and at the top of your list.

So if you and I said, well, what if we went to our financial institution and we got a line of credit and we say, as security for that line of credit, I provide my property, I don't have to use the line of credit. But that property through the lens of a criminal group looks like it's tied up and encumbered so that there's less equity for them to get out of there. So that's one of the things that we can do.

I don't have free clear title to my home. I've got a relationship with a financial service provider, and they've put a mortgage that I agree with on my title. And it's not that we want to push the fraudster to someone else because that's what happens. If I say, don't come after me because I'm protecting my property, we push the fraudster somewhere else. So that's one of the things that we can do.

DORETTA THOMPSON

00:38:45.51

What about — and I know it's a lot easier to check our own credit on an ongoing basis is. What about doing things like regular checks on your credit score to see if anything's changed or if there have been any hits to our credit and suddenly saying, well I didn't do that. I don't understand why somebody's requesting that information.

JENNIFER FIDDIAN-GREEN

00:39:08.01

I think that we've come through a real journey on this. So the short answer to that is, yes, you can do it. You can actually pay to have that data pushed to you so you don't have to remember to go in and check it all the time. I'm a little bit uncomfortable, and I never have personally paid for that because I don't think I should have to pay for that.

What I learned — and I think there's probably still lots more for me to learn or to make my knowledge more current, but when I investigated my own case, it was interesting for me to think about my data as a part of a database that is the key asset of these credit agencies and files. If you think just generally, what is a credit agency, well, they are a company that has millions of credit file, and what they do is, they earn money by organizations paying them to access that credit data.

So part of my thinking was, well, if they're going to use my data to make money, which is what they do, then I need them to protect my data in a good way. So your question before about the different institutions involved, we need our credit agencies to make sure that they're protecting that data and not letting criminals groups access it.

And both of our credit agencies, TransUnion and Equifax, have done a lot, particularly, leaning in around fraud to educate and do more. So there's lots of good things going on there. But let's just be clear that these crimes, what happened to me and other ones, would not have happened if they can't access the credit because no mortgage lender is going to lend the money if they think it's a bad credit risk. They need to get past the credit hurdle.

So yes, we can go in and check our credit. And what we're really interested in is checking the activity on our credit. Does anyone look like they're using my data. We can work with those groups and have that information pushed to us, and it costs money to do that.

You and I were chatting. I'd just gotten one this week, actually. A communication from a company that said, hey, really sorry, I have to tell you that my data has been breached, and your name was a part of that data. By the way, we're going to pay for your credit protection services. We're going to pay for one or two years.

Communication to me said that they were going to pay for protection. I haven't organized it all yet. If you click here, we'll pay for you for two years so that you can go in and check your credit score and you'll get the information pushed to you. So that kind of stuff is happening now.

DORETTA THOMPSON

00:41:45.00

Yeah. And then, of course, there are the basics about protecting your identity to the extent that you are capable of protecting it, things like not writing passwords on credit cards and all that kind of thing, or being very careful with your identity as careful as you can, understanding that data is out there and you're not always in a position to protect it.

JENNIFER FIDDIAN-GREEN

00:42:06.81

I think I've come to believe that our data is out there, and if fraudsters criminal groups are invested in targeting that data, they're probably going to get access to it. But what we can do as individuals, it's so important. Yes, we have to protect our data. We must still do all of that, but we need to work with reputable parties. We have to work with reputable parties, and we have to have the confidence to say, no.

The old story — if someone showed up on your door and you didn't know them, you don't have to open the door if you think they're coming to you for money. If somebody calls you and it's unsolicited, hang up, please take permission from me. Don't feel obligated. Don't feel guilty. Hang up. If somebody calls you and they're trying to sell you something, get it out of your life.

The email that comes in — we've got all sorts of warnings around phishing emails and all sorts of things. If it's an unsolicited email trying to sell you something, or hey, something great happened. If only you paid \$100, you could do this or — if it's unsolicited, you don't know who's behind it, just delete it. Get out. Get away. Work with reputable parties that you know that you can trust. We have to do that more and more. We have to be on guard at that level, I believe, as individuals.

DORETTA THOMPSON

00:43:25.83

Yeah, I think so. And just one final question, and this is more a personal question. I mean, I find it fascinating listening to you talk about how you were able to put on your forensic hat doing this to see yourself through it. And so it became a sleuthing expedition where you actually had the skill set to do this.

But of course, most people that this happens to do not have that skill set. And this is a personal below it. Even though you're not the actual financial victim, there is still a sense where there's a personal invasion. How did you feel about that? What did it make you feel, and how did you get past that?

JENNIFER FIDDIAN-GREEN

00:44:08.31

Yes. LAUGHING Yes, I felt it very strongly and felt it right at the core, and it became cathartic for me to work through it and investigate it. I had to do that because that's who I am and what I did. But the weight of this crime — and I often really reflect on the weight of the crime on the shoulders of the individual whose data has been used, and you just feel like everything is out of control, and it's right at the core of your identity.

It's who you are. It's your name. It's your identity information. And everywhere you go, and every group you see, you're suspicious now. For years, I couldn't — in retail environments before we bought everything online, there was a period where they used to have you sign your name on the pads and the stores. I mean, I think you still do today. I went through a period of time where I refused to sign my name because I would challenge them.

And no, no store clerk in a retail mall needs to be challenged, but I'd say, what are you going to do with my data? How are you going to protect my signature? There was a point that I got — I got quite upset, actually. I got quite mad because both of the lending companies, in different ways, they were quite different. They both had been victims financially of the fraud, but it was quite different how it happened at each and the people at each and how they dealt with it.

But it came a point where I, as the named individual in the fraud, had to help each of them so that they could, under their insurance, fraud insurance policies, go collect the money, be covered for the money that they had lost. So I had to sign an affidavit as to what had happened, and that I wasn't involved, and this wasn't me, and that it was other third party fraudsters involved.

And my signing of that affidavit helped them put together a file where they said, OK, this happened. And so now here's the next step. This is what we have to do, and so we filed it with our insurers. This whole thing is very complex, and that institution was made whole for the financial loss on that file.

And so I helped both of them. But I was trying to process what was going on because both of those groups were able to get on to the business as usual in the next step. But I was left standing there still with my credit file getting updated every week with the wrong information that I hadn't corrected yet, and this feeling of loss. OK, even if I make sure everything's OK now because the two companies are gone, it could happen again because the fraudsters have my data.

And after a while, you just get a little bit numb and you move on you move away from it. I've spent a lot of time — what I did to get past it, was, for many years, I presented numerous times a month to different community groups in my work as well as personally just to raise awareness. Be aware. Say no. A lot of the things that we're talking about now, so that helped me move on.

I had a couple of law enforcement investigators tell me, say, look, the chances of it happening to you are higher than the someone else because they already have your data. It's never happened again though, I think because I spent a lot of time presenting.

I was very unsettled with the weight of this crime being left with the individual, and it got me reflecting a lot on — so I'll get back to being — for those of us who are CPAs and professionals, and the ethics and the integrity under which we have to do our work. So not just taking care of the institution that we're involved with and letting them get on to next steps, but running and leading the processes inside them to protect the individuals in our society, that's important.

I teach a course — I guess, teach part of a course at a masters of forensic accounting program, and I really would try to instill — we need business leaders and CPAs. We need to lead with integrity to thinking about how important all of these systems are for everyone.

DORETTA THOMPSON

00:48:35.21

It's really interesting. The process of working by signing the affidavit, you are able to make them whole, but there wasn't anybody to help you be whole again.

JENNIFER FIDDIAN-GREEN

00:48:45.16

Not at that time. And it's better now, but I still get calls from individuals who are saying, I don't know what to do. And there's resources to point them to now. You can go to the credit agencies and they will help you. There's a better process today. If you have the money, you can hire groups to pay and who will do this. I think it's quite expensive. That wasn't the solution for me, but I still feel that the weight of the uncertainty and the weight of the crime is on the individual.

DORETTA THOMPSON

00:49:15.31

Jennifer, thanks so much for sharing your story with us.

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