



*“WE’RE GONNA
LOOK
FOR YOU HARDER
THAN
THE COPS”*

*Crime may be the same old game,
but **bounty hunting** is not*



It was another of David Jenny's dreams. ¶ He had pictured himself chasing somebody through a shopping mall or going airborne off a cliff in his car. This time, he was walking down a deserted alley. Up ahead, something glimmered in the moonlight: a sports motorcycle parked outside a building. Riderless. Beckoning. ¶ A psychiatrist might say that the sleek bike symbolized carefree youth, that Jenny, 28, subconsciously yearned to kick-start the mother and roar off, to escape the burdens and responsibilities that lie waiting around the dead man's curve of middle age. ¶ Nope. His dream simply meant Jenny tends to remain on the job even while sleeping. ¶ He's a professional bounty hunter (known in polite society as a "bail enforcement agent"), one of two on staff at Freedom Bail Bonding in Fairfax.

Bail enforcement agent, a.k.a. bounty hunter, David Jenny stakes out a house in Chantilly where a "skip" is believed to be.

**BY TOM DUNKEL
PHOTOGRAPHS BY
HECTOR EMANUEL**

The recession hasn't hurt business at Freedom, which posts pre-trial bonds for about 5,000 defendants a year, representing liabilities in excess of \$20 million. ¶ In the fall of 2009, a Freedom employee wrote a \$10,000 bond on behalf of Michael Rehak, a 30-something truck driver from Springfield with a passion for motorcycles. On June 21, state police had clocked him traveling 145 mph on Virginia's Interstate 295. A chase ensued, crossing from Henrico County into Hanover County. Rehak won — until he shot onto Interstate 95 and lost control of his black 2005 Suzuki on an exit ramp. Minor injuries. Major legal problems. ¶ Hanover authorities charged him with reckless driving and “felony eluding.” They released Rehak on his own recognizance, but he never showed up for his October preliminary hearing in Hanover County District Court. An arrest warrant subsequently was issued. Soon Fairfax County police came knocking on the door of Rehak's Springfield apartment. He not only refused to come out, he denied he was Michael Rehak. Bad idea.

Fairfax police added another charge of “false identity” and hauled him off to county jail. That's where Rehak spotted a Freedom Bail Bonding business card pinned to a wall. A day later, Rehak walked out of jail, thanks to Freedom covering his \$10,000 bail.

Unfortunately, he kept walking.

In early December, Rehak blew off a second preliminary hearing scheduled in Hanover County. On Dec. 16, he failed to appear in Fairfax County District Court on the secondary false-identity charge. By that point, Michael Ranier Rehak officially had become a bail jumper. Another warrant was issued for his arrest. Freedom Bail Bonding found itself on the hook for the entire \$10,000 bond — unless Rehak could be apprehended and brought before the court within the standard six-month grace period allowed for “skips,” as they're called in the bounty hunting trade.

David Jenny went to the Fairfax County courthouse on Dec. 16. It's only a block from the offices of Freedom Bail Bonding. He assumed Rehak wouldn't be there, since he'd already ducked his prior court date in Hanover. However, it was Jenny's job to find him, and he knew the Fairfax County police officer who had arrested Rehak would show up for the hearing. Jenny wanted to find out if the officer had a recent

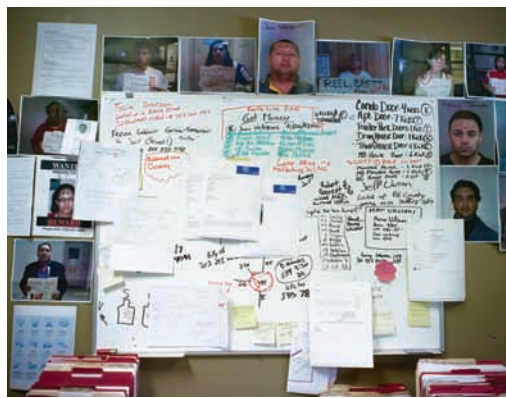


photo of the suspect (she did) or any information pertaining to his whereabouts (she didn't).

Michael Rehak had no clue that the Freedom Bail Bonding hounds were on his trail so quickly. He should have.

“This is what I tell everybody: ‘We're gonna look for you harder than the cops will,’” Jenny says. “When there's money involved, you're gonna get found.”

But as days passed and winter morphed into spring, Jenny — working in concert with Elmer Mata, his bounty hunting partner at Freedom — could only figure that Rehak, a native New Yorker, had thumbed his nose at Virginia and high-tailed it home. That's what skips usually do: run for cover in familiar surroundings.

In early March, Jenny had his dream about that riderless motorcycle in the alley. He took it as an omen that Rehak would get away.

Dave Gambale, the ex-Marine who owns Freedom Bail Bonding, has enormous faith in Jenny, even though Jenny doesn't fit the stereotypical image of a beefy, swaggering, cowboy-booted bounty hunter. David Jenny's nickname is “Tugboat” (he once towed a 29-foot cabin cruiser from Pennsylvania to Virginia with a Volkswagen), but it ought to be “Kayak.” He's 5-foot-7 and chimney-sweep-thin at 140 pounds. Plus, shy on top of that. Yet looks can be deceiving, even in this macho line of work. Jenny is

a computer whiz, but also experienced in mixed martial arts. Gambale regards him as the epitome of the modern, brains-over-brawn bounty hunter.

He, therefore, was unfazed when Jenny described his dream about Michael Rehak's motorcycle. Gambale had his own, decidedly upbeat, interpretation: “That means we'll catch him.”

But the process of catching skips is no longer the wild, wooly and largely unregulated affair it was a dozen years ago when Gambale started Freedom Bail Bonding. New laws went into effect in Virginia in 2008. The impetus was an incident that took place on Christmas Eve 2002. Bounty hunter James Howard Dickerson (who himself had a criminal record) bashed down the door of a Richmond home in search of a skip. Roberto Martinez sat inside having dinner with his relatives. There was a scuffle. Dickerson shot and killed Martinez, who was unarmed. It also turned out Martinez hadn't

*Jenny wonders how bounty hunters functioned before the Internet. He considers a laptop **a more indispensable weapon than a gun.***



jumped bail. Dickerson had broken into the wrong house and killed an innocent man. He later was convicted of voluntary manslaughter — and sentenced to only two years in prison.

A number of other screw-ups surfaced nationwide; for example, a woman dragged from New York to Alabama by a bounty hunter who gave her a “sorry-bout-that” apology and return bus fare after he belatedly realized it was a case of mistaken identity. Those kinds of fiascoes, combined with the Martinez case, inspired the Virginia legislature to crack down.

The state Department of Criminal Justice Services now licenses bail enforcement agents. Currently, there are about 150 active licensees. Applicants must take 40 hours of classroom instruction and 14 hours of firearms training, and get recertified every two years. A convicted felon can’t be a bounty hunter in Virginia. It’s unlawful to use dogs or an assault rifle in bail recovery. Bounty hunters must notify local police in advance when attempting to capture a skip within their jurisdiction.

Laws vary across the country. A handful of states and the District of Columbia either forbid commercial “surety” bonding or severely restrict its use. They basically release defendants on the honor system. Some states such as Maryland take a middle road: Bail bonding is regulated, but bounty hunting is not. “It’s the patchwork approach that lends itself to so much mischief,” says Dale Race, who is counsel for Freedom Bail Bonding and also a lobbyist for Americans for the Preservation of Bail.

Race says most pertinent trade associations support national standards for bail bonding and bail enforcement. “Sometimes you need to be a little bit more proactive,” he adds.

Dave Gambale is all in favor of quality controls that keep cowboys out of the business. That’s why he hires the likes of Jenny and Mata.

“I’m so confident in these guys,” he says, “I can write risky bonds.”

Freedom Bail Bonding occupies a bland corner storefront on the fringe of bland downtown Fairfax, immediately next to a barber shop. There are three worn velour chairs and a chocolate-brown couch in the reception area. Also an ATM machine. Gambale believes in grass-roots marketing. He gives away souvenir bumper stickers and tiny-handcuffs key chains, even T-shirts that read *Support Your Bail Bondsman: Get Arrested*.

After retiring from the Marines as a gunnery sergeant, “Gunny” Gambale worked as a solo bounty hunter, then expanded into bail bonding. Today, he has 20 bondsmen on his payroll: a few in Maryland and southern Virginia, most operating out of Fairfax County.

He easily could be mistaken for one of his clients: shaved head, boombox voice, forearms resplendent with tattoos. He pinches Skoal and has a metabolism reminiscent of a rubber ball bouncing down a stairwell. He is also a born-again Christian.

Opposite page: Photos of skips are posted at Freedom Bail Bonding in Fairfax. Top: Freedom’s David Jenny, left, and Elmer Mata, right. In the center is owner Dave Gambale.

“I was a destructive individual from 18 to 40. No matter how old you are, what situation you’re in, you can always change,” Gambale says, explaining his philosophy of bail bonding. “This is my ministry, man!”

Few defendants accused of violent crimes are released on bail, but Gambale has written bonds for virtually every other kind of transgressor, from a jewel thief to a man caught having sex with not one, but two horses.

In Virginia, bail bondsmen make their money by tacking a surcharge, usually 10 percent, onto the face value of a bond. Easy pickings — provided everyone pays up and shows up for court. They don't. A 2006 Department of Justice study found 18 percent of felons jumped bail, but that's a broader sample encompassing both defendants who posted a cash bond and those released on their own recognizance.

Bond applicants usually are required to have a co-signer who is willing to guarantee their bond. What complicated the Rehak case was that a girlfriend co-signed, but the couple subsequently split. Normally, if the bonded client disappears, bounty hunters lean heavily upon that co-signer and family members for leads. They try to get hold of recent phone records and credit card purchases. Then there are the more creative methods. Jenny and Mata have flushed out skips by phoning them and posing as FedEx dispatchers: Will you be home tomorrow to accept a delivery? Can you please confirm the street address?

"Everybody likes to get packages," Jenny says.

Who are you?
Janice. I don't think I know u, I was just adding random ppl that I have mutual friends with.

lmao. Well, you're to cute not to have as a friend... :)

A few months into the Michael Rehak investigation, a breakthrough occurred. Janice Howard (alias David Jenny) became Facebook friends with him.

Jenny wonders how bounty hunters functioned before the Internet. He considers a laptop a more indispensable weapon than a gun. "When I got this job, I figured my computer skills would help," he says. But he underestimated how much: "At least one day a week, that's all I do."

It's not just searching public records and court documents. He's continually amazed at how many skips have Facebook and MySpace pages. They can run but apparently can't unplug.

Jenny began his cybersleuthing shortly after Rehak skipped his mid-December 2009 court appearance. Jenny browsed motorcycle and drag racing bulletin boards, searched social networking sites by surname and Zip code. Within a few weeks, he'd found Rehak's Facebook and MySpace entries.

Next, Jenny concocted a phony online beauty contest. He maintains a Web site for a side business he has selling mail-order auto parts. He used that site to post a handful of

photographs taken of models at car shows, asking visitors to vote for their favorite babe. Of course, invitations to vote were sent only to Michael Rehak, who viewed the contest page eight times.

Thanks to those page clicks, Jenny was able to identify Rehak's Internet protocol address. That's the numeric code, sort of an electronic fingerprint, assigned to any computer connected to a network. The IP address gives an approximate



geographic location of the user. Rehak was accessing the Internet from Long Island, somewhere in the vicinity of Syosset.

Jenny needed more specific information to pin him down, so he copied an Internet photo of a hot blonde in a halter top and launched bogus Facebook and MySpace pages in the name of "Janice Howard," a fictitious 25-year-old college student from Pennsylvania.

Do you have a BF? Or are you Jus super pretty and single?
uhhh we are kinda off n on right now...mostly cuz im in college...ya know...like to parrtty. How about u?

I hear ya...Its hard when ur in school. Well Im single. Been working 6 days a week so its kinda hard to have a relationship. I broke up with my X of 2 yrs last April, So jus been dating ;)

They exchanged messages for three weeks. Jenny learned Rehak was managing an Italian restaurant, had sold his car and was making plans to move to Miami. Useful details. However, his objective was to mine data on Rehak's social network pages. He hoped to score a phone number or street address.

From perusing Rehak's home page on MySpace, Jenny had discovered he was born in Brooklyn, his father is Colombian, his nephew has a rock band — and he's looking for love.

Mata, in the foreground, and Jenny in their office. Jenny says he spends at least one full day a week on his computer.

In answer to the MySpace pro-

It's all about *mental gamesmanship*: "I love the fact that someone feels they're smarter than me."

file prompt "Who I'd like to meet," Rehak had written, "*One In A Million...An Angel!!! Where Are You?*"

A main criticism of commercial bail bonding is that it places a financial burden on defendants who have yet to be convicted of a crime. That may be a persuasive argument against the practice, because the United States and the Philippines are the only countries that utilize bail bondsmen.

The concept evolved from medieval English law but is grounded in an 1873 U.S. Supreme Court case that remains bedrock principle today. In *Taylor v. Taintor*, a man was transported from New York back to Maine after dodging a burglary charge. The Supreme Court affirmed his detention, declaring that bounty hunters can exercise constitutional powers when tracking a skip that, in some ways, surpass those of the police: "They may pursue him into another state; may arrest him on the Sabbath; and, if necessary, may break and enter his house for that purpose. ... It is likened to the re-arrest, by the sheriff, of an escaping prisoner."

The cult TV show "Dog the Bounty Hunter" — which stars Duane "Dog" Chapman, he of the bleached-blond mullet, snakeskin boots and thrill-a-minute fugitive recoveries — presents a deftly edited, dramatically enhanced version of real life. In actuality, bounty hunting is a monumental test of patience in which long stretches of tedium are punctuated by occasional bursts of firecracker action. Imagine a baseball game where pitchers spend 45 minutes contemplating the ball before winding up and throwing it. Most skips surrender without a fight.

Rod Milstead grew up in Maryland and played eight seasons as an offensive guard in the National Football League, the last two with the Washington Redskins. He retired in 1999 and became a dual bail bondsman-bounty hunter in Charles County. The NFL was far more rough-and-tumble.

"I've had to draw my weapon three times in 10 years," Milstead says. "I've never pulled the trigger on a person."

The allure for him is more cerebral than physical. It's all about mental gamesmanship, the hide-and-seek matching of wits: "I love the fact that someone feels they're smarter than me."

Elmer Mata — the bigger (270 pounds) half of Freedom Bail Bonding's bounty hunting duo — is a staunch Redskins fan but had never heard of Milstead. Mata was born in El Salvador; his family immigrated to Southern California when he was a boy. He wound up settling in Northern Virginia because his older brother is a Fairfax County firefighter.

Mata, 31, is married with three children. He drove long-distance rigs for more than a decade, trucking furniture from Virginia to California and back in two days without sleep, pushing potatoes from Washington state to Georgia. The road-dog existence finally got to him. A bail bondsman

friend told him to give bounty hunting a shot. He got his license, and Gambale hired him just over a year ago.

Jenny grew up outside Philadelphia, attended community college, dabbled for a while in Web design but couldn't find a comfortable career niche. He started a business importing drag-racing parts from Japan, but that didn't generate enough steady income. A friend suggested he put his anal retentiveness to work bounty hunting.

"I didn't think it was a real profession," Jenny recalls. "I thought it was a Wild West thing that you couldn't do anymore."

Jenny was then living in Rockville. He took a bounty hunting course in Fairfax County and learned about Freedom Bail Bonding. In January 2008, he stopped by to inquire about job possibilities. Gambale hired him on the spot.

At that time, a Marine named Scott Gunn was assigned to the Pentagon, following two tours of duty in Iraq. In his off hours, he moonlighted as a bounty hunter for Gambale. He considers Jenny "a natural" at the cat-and-mouse ordeal of finding people who don't want to be found.

"He takes it personal," says Gunn. "I would leave my cases at the office when I went home. He's constantly thinking about his next move. You wouldn't believe the times he'd come in talking about having dreams about defendants. He takes it very serious."

Jenny and Mata share a small office at Freedom. They each juggle about 30 cases. There's a large map on the wall, and whenever a skip gets caught, Jenny puts a check mark near the spot where the skip was nabbed. Written in felt-tip pen on several nearby bulletin boards are the names of big-money skips still on the loose, along with their bail bond liabilities. Head-shot photos are taped by some of those names for easy reference.

Luis Bonilla, \$25,000.

Alan Pearson, \$5,000.

Darwin Velasquez, \$7,000.

Michael Rehak, \$10,000.

Mata and Jenny fixate on those faces and dollar signs. Is that guy getting tired of running yet? Who might be willing to rat him out? Should I turn up the heat or back off a bit? The most elusive skips balloon in importance as cases drag on.

"It's crazy. It's like you're starstruck," Jenny says. "You stare at their picture for six or nine months. When I finally catch them, I want to get their autograph or something."

Freedom Bail Bonding's fugitive recovery team sometimes conducts marathon skip sweeps. Jenny's personal record is six collars in a single day.

On another sweep, last February, he, Mata and Gunn headed into the field with Jeff Gillette, a retired cop who was trying his hand at bounty hunting. They piled into Gambale's black Ford Explorer truck — which serves as Free-

dom's all-purpose paddy wagon — at 4 p.m. and returned at 2 in the morning. Each skip they scooped up had to be transported to a magistrate, who remanded them to county jail. The paperwork chewed up hours.

Skip No. 1 was wanted for grand larceny. His girlfriend turned him in, sending serial text messages to Gillette that he was on his way to a barber shop in Herndon. The recovery team parked nearby and waited for an hour. No sign of their man. Mata got out of the car to do street-level surveillance. Within minutes, he spotted someone who looked like the skip getting into a blue Ford Taurus.

Jenny was at the wheel of the Explorer. He left Mata behind and tailed the car. When it pulled into a 7-Eleven, Jenny blocked it from behind. Gunn and Gillette pounced on the Taurus. The suspect was in the back seat, claiming this was all a misunderstanding. He'd lost his cellphone. His attorney forgot about his court date.

"You may want to get a new attorney," Gunn replied.

Skip No. 2 was a second-infraction DWI. He lived in a townhouse on a quiet dead-end street in Leesburg. The Freedom team roused him out of bed. "This is just like TV! The 'Dog!'" his startled wife exclaimed as he was being escorted out the front door.

Skip No. 3 was running from a reckless driving charge and thought to be staying with relatives in Sterling. Jenny drew to a stop outside a home in the heart of suburbia. A visibly perturbed man answered the door in his underwear. The Freedom team proceeded to politely but firmly search the premises. Six sleepy-eyed people popped out of bedrooms.

No sign of the skip.

"It's just gonna make it better when we catch him," Gunn mumbled as he trudged back to the car.

Skip No. 4 was Elmer Mata's case, another grand larceny charge. "I've waited on Rudy Barerra five times now, four hours each time," he grouched during the drive to Falls Church. An informant told him Barerra would be at Barcroft Plaza and provided the apartment number.

It was almost midnight with a light rain falling. The team members put on bulletproof vests, checked their pistols and moved into position. Gillette guarded a rear entrance. Gunn took the front of the building. Jenny slipped inside and stood by a second-floor apartment door. Mata huddled under a tree outside and phoned a number his source had given him.

Jenny pressed his ear to the door, listening for rings that would confirm they had the right address. He heard them.

"Open the door! Abre la puerta! Abre la puerta!" While not fluent in Spanish, Jenny has memorized a few basic phrases.

A woman let him in. Gunn and Mata followed quickly on Jenny's heels, opening their jackets to make sure their hol-

stered guns were readily visible.

Another woman appeared. Then two young men. Jenny ordered them to take seats. "We're here for Rudy Barerra. For our safety, we have to keep you here where we can see you," he explained gently. "You can go back to bed in a minute."

Because bounty hunters are nocturnal creatures, the element of surprise works heavily in their favor when a skip's mind is clouded with sleep. So it was with Rudy Barerra. Gunn and Mata pulled him out of a closet. He had taken refuge under a pile of clothes.

They hustled him out to the car, gleefully recounting the bust. Jenny had notified the Fairfax County police upon the team's arrival at Barcroft Plaza. He called back to let them know they'd taken the defendant into custody. But as he was driving out of the parking lot, the rush of snatching Barerra had already worn off.

Jenny remarked to no one in particular, "Now, if we could just get Darwin Velasquez."



Jenny and Mata listen before knocking on the door of an Alexandria apartment. Right: Jenny questions a man during a late-night search in Silver Spring.

One evening in June, Jenny was hunched over his laptop. Suddenly, he said to himself, "This guy's done."

The Michael Rehak case had been stalled for months. Jenny had known Rehak's AOL address for some time to no avail. Tonight the thought suddenly occurred to push the envelope of bounty hunting authority by trying to log on to the account.

It worked. Jenny managed to answer all the security questions, having to make only one educated guess. At his fingertips were filing cabinets full of Rehak's personal e-mails, bearing labels such as "family," "lawyer" and "wife."

He skimmed scores of messages, some of which contained gold: telephone numbers. A quick check of a reverse telephone directly yielded a street address. A little more online digging revealed who owned the property. It seemed Rehak was renting a room at a private home in Massapequa, Long Island.

Mata was at his desk on the other side of the room. "This is the best way we've ever caught anybody," Jenny gushed.

They immediately canceled their after-work plans and packed the Explorer: binoculars, two-way radios, laptop computers, handcuffs and two expandable batons instead of their handguns. Rehak didn't seem the violent type.

"Ninety-five percent chance we get him based on the information we have," Mata predicted.

It was nearly 1 a.m. when they hit the road, fueled by Pizza Combos and coffee. By sunrise, they were in Massapequa. Jenny, ever cautious, removed the front license plate of the Explorer, decreasing the odds that somebody might take note of his Virginia tags. He bought a Yankees hat at a gas station to look more like a local.

By 7:30, they were parked within sight of the house, a white, compact split level with neatly trimmed bushes. It sat smack on the main street of town. Not good. Passersby might assume they were witnessing a mugging instead of a

out of the front seat, his silver bail enforcement agent badge hanging on a chain from his neck. He approached Rehak on the sidewalk.

"There's an outstanding warrant for you in the state of Virginia," Jenny declared, unhooking a pair of handcuffs from his belt. Rehak, stunned, responded with a mild expletive.

He offered no resistance, and it was over in 30 seconds. That was a relief to Jenny and Mata, since a New York license is mandatory to forcefully restrain a bail jumper within state lines. Had Rehak made any kind of fuss, Jenny would have been legally obliged to let him go or summon one of the local bounty hunters Gambale uses as freelance backup.

They permitted Rehak to make a flurry of cellphone calls. To his boss. To his sister. To his brother. Where to store his belongings, if necessary? What to tell his landlord? How to handle joint custody of his teenage son?

"Incredible," Rehak sighed. He had run, he said, out of fear of getting hit with serious jail time for triple-digit speeding. "All this for a traffic violation and me being stupid. ... I don't do drugs. No weapons. No stealing. One traffic violation. I'm not a criminal, the way I look at it."

"Man, I don't see you doing time for this," said Mata, trying to console him. "People with two DWIs, *they* don't do time."

The miles unspooled. Mata was at the wheel. Jenny dozed in the back seat, perhaps dreaming of another skip. Rehak stared out the window. Shortly after they entered Maryland, as if scripted for "Dog the Bounter Hunter," an unlikely song came on the radio:

*Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound,
that saved a wretch like me. I once was
lost, but now am found. ...*

When the trio arrived at Freedom Bail Bonding, Dave Gambale, a reformed wretch, ushered them into Jenny and Mata's office. He had yet to

determine which county magistrate had first dibs on Rehak. While that was being sorted out, he launched into a variation of the tough-love speech he gives most captured skips.

"Damn, I'm disappointed. You're a 32-year-old man," Gambale barked, shades of his old drill instructor self. "How are you gonna pay child support? Honestly, I hate putting people in jail. I feel bad. But I can't lose 10 grand. ..."

Michael Rehak stood silently in front of him, in chains, on the verge of tears.

As Gambale continued his mini-sermon, Jenny quietly walked over to the wall map by his desk, felt-tip pen in hand. He put a check mark on Long Island. wp

Tom Dunkel lives in Washington and is writing a book about an integrated baseball team during the Depression. He can be reached at atwpmagazine@washpost.com.



fugitive recovery.

An hour crawled by. Jenny phoned the house, using a software application that masks incoming calls. A woman answered: the owner. Jenny hung up. What about Rehak? Could he have moved out?

A half-hour later, Mata shook Jenny, who was catnapping in the driver's seat. "There he is! That's him!"

A man wearing glasses, and dressed casually in shorts and a blue-and-white striped shirt, bounded down the front steps. It was Michael Rehak. He turned left at the end of the driveway, walking toward downtown. Mata got out of the car and fell in behind him, keeping a safe distance. Meanwhile, Jenny moved the Explorer two blocks in the direction Rehak was heading and parked on a side street. They had him boxed in.

"I'm getting that adrenaline rush," Jenny said as he slid