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“everybody was doing it” as the pandemic battered the nation’s economy.

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*By Jay Weaver – Miami Herald (via TNS).*

Daniela Rendon, a real estate broker, was convicted of swindling COVID-19 loan programs — to lease a Bentley SUV, among other things. On Thursday, she said during her sentencing hearing in Miami federal court that it seemed like “everybody was doing it” as the pandemic battered the nation’s economy.

But after she got caught pocketing hundreds of thousands of dollars, Rendon said she realized the victims of her crime were not the “faceless entities of the U.S. government” but rather the “countless individuals and businesses” that suffered during an “unparalleled period of economic distress.”

Rendon's confession — including writing a 30-page thesis on her remorse — helped

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surrendered to prison authorities immediately after her hearing as about a dozen tearful family members and friends said their good-byes.

According to court records, Rendon used her job as a Miami real estate broker to carry out her crime against a pair of COVID-19 loan programs.

At the height of the pandemic, Rendon pretended to be a Miami real estate developer who desperately needed relief loans from the federal government to stay afloat. But rather than spend the money on legitimate business expenses, Rendon used the COVID-19 loans to lease a 2021 Bentley Bentayga (sales price, \$181,000), rent a Biscayne Bay apartment, pay for cosmetic dermatology procedures and refinish her designer shoes, according to court records.

In April, Rendon pleaded guilty to wire fraud, which carried a maximum penalty of 20 years. On Thursday, Assistant U.S. Attorney Jonathan Bailyn recommended a three and a half year sentence while her defense attorney, Robert Mandell, asked for a lenient term of five years' probation.

Rendon fabricated records for her real estate business, Rendon PA, saying it collected about \$92 million in revenues, to qualify for pandemic relief from the Paycheck Protection Program and Economic Injury Disaster Loan Program, according to an indictment and other court documents. Both programs are run by the Small Business Administration, which guaranteed loans approved by banks under the CARES Act approved by Congress in 2020.

But in reality, Rendon was a sales associate for A3 Development LLC, which paid her company, Rendon PA, \$2,000 on a biweekly basis over a year before the pandemic struck in March 2020, according to a factual statement filed with her plea agreement. In total, Rendon received \$381,000 in "fraudulent funds" from the government loan

relief programs during the pandemic, according to prosecutors with the U.S.

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country who have been accused of exploiting the SBA's relief programs for businesses that faced hardship during the COVID-19 pandemic between 2020 and 2022. South Florida, with the dubious distinction of being a financial fraud capital, became a hub for hundreds of people accused of exploiting the SBA's loan programs, federal authorities say.

According to prosecutors, one of Rendon's collaborators was Andre Lorquet, who pretended to be a certified tax preparer in South Florida. He was charged with falsely claiming that a handful of businesses were struggling during the pandemic and filed COVID-19 relief loans for them. The Miami man pleaded guilty in January to money laundering and aggravated identity theft charges and faces sentencing later this month.

Lorquet ended up receiving \$4.4 million from the SBA's loan programs for himself and others, according to court records. He also went on a shopping spree, buying a Tesla Plaid, a Porsche Panamera GTS and a Lamborghini Urus, records show.

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