

**Aces Cracked Poker Room**

Image: Facebook

Poker Room Operator Criticizes State's Ongoing War on Allegedly Illegal Gaming

RAY STERN | JUNE 20, 2014 | 1:53PM

A Glendale man facing felony charges of running an illegal poker room claims he "never made a penny" off the operation.

Mike Talerico, 42, is one of several local men facing serious charges in separate cases since

the state began a fresh crackdown on poker rooms in December. The legal action began a year after a cover story in *New Times*

detailed the spotty enforcement occurring up until then.

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Mark Brnovich, the former Arizona Department of Gaming director now running as a Republican for state Attorney General, vowed after he was appointed in 2009 to go after off-reservation poker rooms, which cannot operate as businesses under state law. (You can invite your buddies over for poker nights, in other words, but the house can't earn money on games or operate side businesses specifically to support poker operations, officials told

New Times

in 2012.) Several high-profile busts, including one that led to the successful conviction of Harold Lee, a former justice of the peace and poker enthusiast.

Following our cover story, which pointed out that most poker rooms in the Valley seemed to be operating in peace, a gaming investigation either began or ramped up. Officials conducted raids on four poker rooms last year, then followed up with raids on two more this month.

"Department of Gaming Deals Another Blow," reads the headline of a June 9 news release about the latest action by the agency.

Busted so far are:

* Mike Talerico of Aces Cracked

* Tomas Rivera, Miguel Rivera and Jose Rivera of Pocket Rockets.

* Thanh Nguyen of Arizona Poker Supply.

A check of Maricopa County records reveals that those defendants have all pleaded not guilty and are fighting their multiple felony and misdemeanor charges on counts including illegal control of an enterprise and promoting gambling.

Rick Medina of the gaming department tells us that another defendant, Frank Johnson of Joker's Social Club, was also indicted. We couldn't find court info on him.

This month, officers with the gaming department, Maricopa County Sheriff's Office, and Mesa and Phoenix police departments raided Pocket Jacks Poker Room in Mesa and Elite Poker Social Club in Phoenix.

Eight poker tables and other "gambling paraphernalia" were seized in the June raids, along with TVs, surveillance cameras, business records, cell phone, a couple grand in cash and a .38-caliber revolver.

The names of the poker-room owners haven't been released yet. In the news release, the gaming department says its officials had previously asked the owners to take "corrective action" with their businesses. But the poker rooms "chose not to comply."

Talerico, as Lee before him, believes the gaming department is simply doing the bidding of the Indian casinos, which run their own poker games with rules that poker purists don't like. But he claims his poker room was more like a hobby than a business. He paid for rent out of his pocket, with money he earned from his other business refurbishing semi-conductor parts, he says. He'd win the occasional jackpots, but maintains he never earned money from the games of others.

Talerico says he opened the poker room about six months ago. He called the gaming department every now and then with questions about how to keep his business legal. He says officials were "vague;" he feels like he was "set up to fail."

The poker room's dealer, Scott Hefferman, is accused of taking tips, but he didn't, says Talerico. Both men have been charged with two felonies and one misdemeanor each.

"This has turned my life upside-down," says Talerico, who's been reduced to moving in

with his dad, unable to run his semi-conductor repair business.

But he plans on fighting the charges. A trial is scheduled for October.

He thinks he's got a chance to win an acquittal.

But he's got advice for the other poker rooms still operating in the Valley: "Anybody that has half a brain should be shutting down."

Got a tip? Send it to: [Ray Stern](#).

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