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Deposed King of Crack Now Free After 5 Years in Prison

By JESSE KATZ
TIMES STAFF WRITER

If there was an eye to the storm, if there was a criminal mastermind behind crack's decade-long reign, if there was one outlaw capitalist most responsible for flooding Los Angeles' streets with mass-marketed cocaine, his name was Freeway Rick.

He didn't make the drug and he didn't smuggle it across the border, but Ricky Donnell Ross did more than anyone else to democratize it, boosting volume, slashing prices and spreading disease on a scale never before conceived. He was a favorite son of the Colombian cartels, South-Central's first millionaire crack lord, an illiterate high school dropout whose single-minded obsession was to become the biggest dope dealer in history.

Working around the clock, taking the age-old axioms of good business to ominous extremes, he transformed a curbside operation at 87th and Figueroa into the Wal-Mart of cocaine. While most other dealers toiled at the bottom rungs of the market, his coast-to-coast conglomerate was selling more than 500,000 rocks a day, a staggering turnover that put the drug within reach of anyone with a few dollars.

"You know how some people feel that God put them down here to be a preacher?" asked the 34-year-old ex-con, his hands clasped as if in prayer. "I felt that he had put me down to be the cocaine man. That's how my environment had twisted my mind and molded me. I was so flipped out that I believed I was the Chosen One."

To run an organization of that magnitude, Ross says he relied on a personal staff of 15 to 20 henchmen, most of whom were paid \$1,000 a week to serve as bodyguards, lookouts, drivers, money counters, crack cookers—even garbage men, whose only task was to dispose of incriminating evidence. Day after day, they'd pick up million-dollar shipments in armed convoys of inconspicuous cars, one of which was always poised to speed off as a decoy. An \$18,000 system of

walkie-talkies, linked to a private channel, kept their movements synchronized.

Back in the neighborhood, Ross had dozens of buildings scattered about to conceal his operation, including a warehouse with police scanners and iron bars, a cook house with digital scales and a restaurant-quality gas stove, a money house with a one-ton safe and currency-counting machines, a rock house with an underground tunnel leading from a closet to the street, and a party house with a satellite dish, NBA-caliber basketball hoops and a maid.

One day in 1986, Ross laid all his money on the living room floor and, after hours of furious tabulation, found himself staring at a \$2.8-million mountain of cash.

His enterprise grew so large – and so completely unfettered by police pressure – that Los Angeles authorities eventually recruited an elite squad of detectives for the sole mission of shutting Ross down. So zealously did the “Freeway Rick Task Force” hunt its quarry, however, that the officers were accused of crossing into the underworld themselves, allegedly planting cocaine on suspects and lining their own pockets with illicit cash.

Their 34-count federal indictment, a case that became part of the worst corruption scandal in local law enforcement history, gave Ross an unexpected bargaining chip when he was finally arrested for smuggling cocaine to Cincinnati in 1989. In exchange for testifying against the cops who once stalked him, crack’s dealer to the dealers walked out of prison in September after just five years.

Now back home, living under his mother’s roof in Carson, Ross remains unrepentant about the destruction his exploits have wrought. He sees himself not as a villain but as a slave to his own consuming addiction – to the adrenaline rush of closing a multimillion-dollar deal, to the manic life of a high-stakes trafficker.

“I did this all day long, 24 hours a day . . . just like the smoker,” Ross said. “When I couldn’t do it, I was sick, I’m talking about sick. Psychologically, I’d be crushed.”

Although he has no dearth of skeptics predicting a relapse, Ross says he wants to redirect his energy – and rebuild his fortune – by constructing a South-Central arts and sports complex for the next generation of potential crack dealers. It’s not so much a moral epiphany as a pragmatic adjustment. Having determined that the drug trade is a no-win proposition, he’s simply looking for a safer game with better odds.

Most police officials are dubious about Ross’ motives, suspecting him of trying to

buy a veneer of respectability, like so many Mafiosi who have used legitimate ventures to conceal illicit gains. What authorities don't doubt is Ross' ability to insinuate himself back into a community he once exploited, to seize any opportunity that will give him the upper hand.

"That was a guy who could sell Popsicles to an Eskimo," said San Fernando Police Lt. Ernest Halcon, a veteran undercover detective who has tracked some of Southern California's most notorious dope dealers. "You want to say he's a low-life, no-good piece of crap. But you got to respect some of these guys for their ambition and cunning. You got to give the devil his due."

The saga of Ricky Ross' rise and fall begins in 1979, when PCP was the drug of choice and cocaine was only for the rich. Ross was 19, a car thief of modest repute who used to strip his spoils in the shadow of the Harbor Freeway, which is how his moniker stuck.

One day, while cooling his heels after an arrest for grand theft auto, he went to visit a friend who had just come home from college. "He's like, 'Man, I'm onto something new,'" recalled Ross, who stared in disbelief as he was handed a \$50 rock. "I was a square. I didn't even believe it was cocaine."

Eager for a new hustle, though, Ross ventured out and showed off his acquisition to an old pimp, who fired it right up and ordered \$100 more. That day, Ross said, he knew he was going to be rich.

To get his foot in the market, Ross stole a car — from the faculty lot of his alma mater, Bret Harte Junior High. He sold the rims for \$250, which bought him nearly an eighth of an ounce of crack. By peddling the rocks individually, he reaped a \$500 return on his investment, which he continued to "double up," turning the \$500 into \$1,000, and so on.

"I didn't really understand what I was doing, but I knew I didn't want the life my mother lived . . . welfare, no car, waiting till the first of the month to have milk and cereal," said Ross, the son of poor East Texas farmers. "I knew there had to be something in the world I could do, something that I could be the best at."

That's when Ross made his first economic discovery — the power of volume. Like a supermarket that buys in bulk, thus selling its product cheaper than any mom-and-pop store, Ross began sinking everything he had back into dope, marveling each time as the unit price dropped. By the end of the decade, he had helped cut wholesale rates from \$60,000 a kilo to just \$10,000.

What truly set Ross apart, however, was the intensity of his focus. While others relished the fast lane, Ross cruised incognito in a Brady Bunch-style station wagon with simulated-wood siding. He never dipped into his own supply, nor did he drink or wear jewelry. A tireless salesman, he lived for the next deal, negotiating with a cellular phone pressed against each ear and a pager, he says proudly, "that used to sing like a bell."

"It got to the point where I enjoyed selling drugs so much that I could be in bed with my woman and, if the right person paged me, I'd get up," said Ross, who is small and wiry at just 145 pounds, with wide eyes and a gleaming smile. "I wasn't even conscious of what \$2 million was anymore. I wanted \$10 million. I wanted to set a record."

First in Los Angeles, then during his cross-country sojourns, Ross used charisma and caginess to cross boundaries that had never been breached. Often he'd win over turf by donating a few ounces of crack to the area's top dope dealer or gangbanger. Sometimes he'd show up in a new place and announce a "smoke party," spreading the word that free rocks would be given to the first arrivals. In his native Texas, one of several states where Ross had legal trouble, he took advantage of old family ties by shipping cocaine to twin cousins.

As implausible as it sounds, Ross insists he never resorted to violence to keep a grip on his dominion, though he often took his 9-millimeter pistol to the firing range and maintained an arsenal of fully automatic Uzis equipped with silencers. Neither was he a true gang member, though he came from a Crips neighborhood and didn't mind if their fearsome reputation helped ward off competitors.

Law enforcement authorities say it is naive to believe that Ross' organization never killed or maimed. But Ross contends that his business was simply too good to get caught up in bloodshed. If he got ripped off, he says, he would write off the loss rather than avenge it. If a rival thought Ross was encroaching, Ross used his low prices to turn the competitor into a client.

By the time the market exploded in 1984, Ross already was dealing directly with the Colombian cartels, who supplied him with 50 to 100 kilos a day. With that, Ross was able to operate dozens of rock houses, catering to thousands of addicts across Los Angeles. He had another three "ounce houses," servicing 100 to 200 mid-level dealers. Finally, he had his own private list of V.I.P. customers, maybe 30 to 50 big-time dealers, who dropped tens of thousands of dollars at a time.

"There's no question about this man's ability to market and merchandise things, it's unbelievable, really," said Officer Robert Enoch, a 40-year police veteran in Sharonville, Ohio, a suburb of Cincinnati. "He was instrumental in putting this

whole thing into motion – and it's still here. I just don't want him back."

Like his celluloid hero Priest, the slick and stylish pusher in the movie "Superfly," Ross also believed that he was just one lucrative deal away from leaving the business behind.

To help make that jump, he built an 18-unit motel, the Freeway Motor Inn, then opened a tire shop, the Big Palace of Wheels. He bought a \$250,000 home in Inglewood, which he paid for entirely in \$1 bills. Among his final purchases was the old Adams Street Theatre, now gutted and in foreclosure, which he still hopes to convert someday into a youth center called the Freeway Academy.

Fashioning himself into an inner-city Robin Hood, Ross also began making donations to South-Central's Algin Sutton park, where he installed new basketball hoops and bought eggs every year for the neighborhood Easter egg hunt. At his mother's South-Central church, Ross paid for new pews and an air conditioner. Every morning, he says, he stuffed his pocket with at least \$1,000 in cash to hand out to anyone needing help.

It was not guilt that drove Ross to give back to his community. Rather, he dispensed gifts just the way he marketed drugs – commodities to be traded for power and respect. "I was the star of the ghetto," he said, "or at least I felt like it."

One night in 1987, the Freeway Rick Task Force almost caught Freeway Rick himself, chasing him into a South-Central alley, where he managed to hop a fence and escape on a passing RTD bus. As Ross fled, according to the officers, he shot at them and dropped a kilo of cocaine.

But as part of a massive money-skimming investigation that brought down more than two dozen sheriff's anti-narcotics deputies, federal prosecutors contended that it was the officers who opened fire on an unarmed Ross, then planted a kilo from their own car. Although many of the most serious corruption charges were later dismissed, Ross' testimony was rewarded with parole after serving less than half of his 10-year interstate trafficking sentence.

"Ross will fall again someday," predicted former nemesis Stephen W. Polak, an ex-LAPD officer who pleaded guilty in October to misdemeanor civil-rights violations. "Let him pay for all the people his drugs have killed, let him put money into the hospitals for all the addicted babies, let me see him turn over a million or two to the IRS and get a job . . . then maybe I'll give him some credibility."

After doing his time for the Cincinnati conviction, Ross served another eight months for his Texas case, which brought his story full circle back to Troup (Pop. 1,659), the cradle of Jim Crow servility his family exchanged for the promise of California when he was 4.

When Ross was paroled three months ago, he revisited his old boyhood home, now a blistered wooden shack, abandoned on a stretch of piney back road in an overgrown field abuzz with cicadas. On that steamy late-summer afternoon, as he sat on the sagging front porch, he took stock of how far he had traveled before succumbing to his own success.

A bandit entrepreneur who once had it all — 14th-row Lakers season tickets, a 38-foot speedboat docked at Marina del Rey, ski lessons in Aspen — was now empty-handed. As difficult as it is to fathom, Ross insists his money was consumed by legal fees, rip-offs and bad investments, made worse by signing contracts he couldn't even read.

Dozens of friends, many of whom had known nothing of crack until he introduced them to the trade, are now condemned to jail cells for decades to come. Because of Ross, they barely know their own children, just as his children — seven of them altogether, by four different mothers — barely know him.

"Everybody loses," Ross said, his head bowed, tears streaming from his eyes. "A guy who thought he was so smart had been a fool all that time."

Now as he lays the groundwork back in Los Angeles for a slew of seemingly pie-in-the-sky projects, from producing a rap album to promoting a prize fight, Ross is convinced that the world of legal commerce can be his oyster.

The difference, he says, is the positive new philosophy he's gleaned from a most unlikely source, Anthony J. Robbins, the fire-walking self-improvement guru of infomercial fame. From Robbins' teachings, which Ross says he studied while learning to read in prison, he's discovered he can help others — and make millions too.

In that respect, Freeway Rick hasn't changed so much since his heady days as the cocaine king. Although he's vowed never to revert to selling drugs, he's still an unadulterated hustler, doing all he can to relive the thrill of hitting it big. Only this time, after the smoke has cleared, he intends to be holding the prize.

"Don't you understand? I'm still sick behind this stuff," Ross said. "I need my fix."

