

# Los Angeles Times

March 5, 1996

## Drug Trial to Focus on Sting

By JESSE KATZ  
TIMES STAFF WRITER

SAN DIEGO — When he was snared last year in an undercover drug sting, shattering his well-publicized vow to go straight, “Freeway” Ricky Ross was betrayed by the very man who taught him the trade.

He knew him only as Danilo, a smooth-talking trafficker from South Gate with cheap cocaine prices and a steady supply. Under Danilo’s tutelage, Ross rose through the ranks of the Los Angeles underworld, becoming the first crack-dealing millionaire on South-Central’s streets.

But as Ross’ trial gets underway today in federal court here, the identity of his cocaine connection has taken on new and surprising dimensions.

Danilo, according to government documents, is really Oscar Danilo Bandon. Bandon is a wealthy Nicaraguan exile who, according to Ross’ attorney, has ties to U.S. intelligence sources.

The Nicaraguan was facing a life sentence and a \$4-million fine for running his own narcotics ring, records show. It was then that Bandon turned on his former protege, Ross says, agreeing to help the Drug Enforcement Administration lure Ross into a bust.

“Bandon is more than just a drug dealer; he is part of a huge global cocaine conspiracy,” said Ross’ attorney, Alan Fenster, who is searching for evidence to back up that allegation.

With Ross now looking at life behind bars for conspiracy to possess and distribute cocaine, his case is a small window into the world of government informants, the often unsavory characters on whom officials rely to infiltrate the narcotics trade. It is also a glimpse into the notorious Latin America-Los Angeles drug pipeline, which exported a social crisis — crack cocaine — to the city’s poorest neighborhoods. Finally, it is a look into the psyche of Ross, a 36-year-old ex-con, who thought he could get close to the flame again without getting burned.

"I felt like my own father set me up," Ross said in a telephone interview from the federal jail in San Diego, adding that Blandon often greeted him with a hug and a homemade meal in his South Gate kitchen. "I don't like that I took the bait, but the bait was almost forcefully fed to me."

The U.S. government won't officially confirm Blandon's background, making most of the allegations about his trafficking difficult to confirm. When the subject of his identity came up at a pretrial hearing here Monday, the matter was discussed in whispers for 45 minutes at a sidebar huddle with Judge Marilyn L. Huff.

A memorandum prepared by the U.S. attorney's office, however, describes Blandon as a "large-scale cocaine broker" until his arrest by DEA agents in 1992. The document shows that prosecutors twice reduced Blandon's sentence after his guilty plea, ultimately freeing him in 1994 after just 28 months. Reborn as a government informant, he was paid \$45,000 for his help in netting Ross. The memo does not detail how his cooperation with the government unfolded.

Assistant U.S. Atty. L. J. O'Neale, who prosecuted Blandon and is using him as the star witness in the case against Ross, acknowledged that officials sometimes ally themselves with criminals to snag even more.

"We work with them because very few people commit their crimes in the presence of saints and bishops," said O'Neale, who declined to comment specifically on this case. "Generally, crimes are committed in the sewers, and the witnesses are sewer rats."

But Ross' attorney argued that such deals are usually made only to bring in a bigger catch. "They say they have to go to bed with the devil in order to catch other devils," said Fenster, referring to Blandon. "But this is the head devil."

Freeway Rick, of course, is no angel. An illiterate high school dropout, he built a coast-to-coast cocaine empire on a \$250 investment, eventually selling more than 500,000 nuggets of crack every day. His infamy was so great that Los Angeles authorities formed the "Freeway Rick Task Force" for the sole purpose of bringing him down.

Instead of getting their man, the officers became mired in the worst money-skimming scandal in Los Angeles law enforcement history. When Ross finally was arrested for interstate trafficking in 1989, he testified against the task force members who once hunted him, bargaining a life sentence down to just five years. Paroled in 1994, he publicly vowed to leave the dope business behind.

“It’s like touching something hot,” Ross said in a series of interviews with The Times shortly after his release. “Don’t take you but a second to change.”

But even as he was making that pronouncement, federal authorities allege, Ross was negotiating with Blandon to purchase 100 kilograms of cocaine. After more than five months of phone calls and face-to-face visits, in which they agreed to pay \$300,000, Ross and several cohorts met Blandon and an undercover DEA agent at a restaurant in Chula Vista.

From there, they traveled to a Montgomery Ward parking lot in National City, where the drug agent handed over the keys to a Chevrolet Blazer filled with cocaine. Ross, according to the indictment, opened the car and inspected the shipment, just as federal authorities swarmed the scene.

“He had every opportunity to take either road – he just took the one he’s always taken,” said former Los Angeles Police Det. Steve Polak, a member of the squad that once tracked Ross’ moves in the ’80s.

Although he admits that he strayed, Ross insists that the government created a crime especially designed for him. Blandon, he said, pursued him doggedly, calling almost every other day, pleading for his help in orchestrating a dope deal. When he balked, Ross said, his former supplier allegedly turned to threats, implying that friends or family would be harmed unless he did business.

“It would be like a cop going into a drug rehab center with a needle full of heroin, then offering it to dope fiends and arresting them as soon as they take it,” said Ross, who often described himself as being as much a slave to the drug as the addicts he exploited. “I guess I had lost control, but why was I put in that position?”

To win his freedom, Ross will have to persuade a jury that the government not only dangled the bait – which is legal – but forced him to bite the hook. The government, meanwhile, needs only to show that Ross was predisposed to commit the crime, and having committed it can be used as proof of his predisposition.