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Former L.A. Drug Kingpin Is Set Free

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TYLER, Tex. — The notorious Los Angeles drug lord known as Freeway Rick, who once boasted that his coast-to-coast cocaine empire grossed more than \$1 million a day, walked out of a Texas jail Wednesday and vowed to return home in search of redemption.

Ricky Donnell Ross, 34, who in the 1980s probably rose faster and higher than any other drug trafficker from the streets of South-Central Los Angeles, said he hoped to head back to his old neighborhood as soon as possible and devote his life to warning youngsters about the mistakes that kept him locked up for most of the last five years.

"I'm definitely going to stage a turn-around," Ross said as he stepped out of the Smith County Jail, sporting dreadlocks, a trim beard and a movie star smile. "A lot of times we let our environment control us, instead of controlling our own environment."

For at least the next two months, Ross will be hooked to an electronic tracking bracelet at his father's home in Tyler, the small East Texas rose-cultivating community where he was born.

Ross had been in jail in Tyler since December, when he received a 10-year prison sentence for conspiring to transport cocaine to two cousins on the outskirts of town, located in a dry county where even the sale of alcohol is a crime.

But Ross, who spent the previous four years in federal prison for conspiring to ship nearly 20 pounds of cocaine from Los Angeles to Cincinnati, was given credit for his time served by Texas authorities, who were able to keep him for just eight months in a minimum-security jail.

"He's done his time," said Ross' mother, Annie Mae, who drove from her Los Angeles home to hug her son as he stepped out on a steamy afternoon in a denim jacket and shiny white basketball shoes. "I think he's had a chance to learn quite

a bit about life.”

While behind bars, Ross said, he learned to read and write for the first time, studied the Bible and counseled younger inmates about the dangers of easy money. He also affirmed his commitment to build a youth center on the site of an abandoned Adams Boulevard theater, which he began to purchase years ago with his illicit profits.

Ross, who once told authorities that he had nearly \$2 million socked away before his empire crumbled, insists that he now has nothing to show for it—a fortune lost to attorney fees, shaky business deals and double-crossing rivals.

“I’m broke,” said Ross, who hopes to raise several million dollars through legitimate ventures for his proposed Freeway Academy when Texas parole officials allow him to return to Los Angeles. “I got \$57.”

A onetime tennis star at Dorsey High School, Ross entered the drug trade on a \$125 investment, eventually supplying rock houses across South-Central before branching out to become one of the nation’s most prolific cocaine wholesalers. Although he was functionally illiterate, Ross displayed shrewd business sense, negotiating bulk purchases directly from Colombian cartels and undercutting his competition by selling hundreds of kilograms a week.

“He was the biggest-time dope dealer to come up from the streets of South-Central,” said Jim Galipeau, a veteran of Los Angeles County’s Probation Department gang unit.

Galipeau said Ross’ reputation was enhanced by his eschewal of the flashy trappings flaunted by his high-rolling peers—no gold chains, no luxury sedans, no fine Italian suits.

“He was more like a Robin Hood-type guy,” Galipeau said. “You never heard of him getting high or drinking or beating women or dealing dope to kids. The guy really had a reputation for helping people out and giving money back to the community.”

But he remained the nemesis of Los Angeles narcotics detectives, who formed an elite anti-drug squad for the sole purpose of dismantling Ross’ operation.

Sheriff’s deputies caught up with him in 1987, when they spotted Ross driving through South-Central and chased him until he pulled into a driveway and escaped by scaling a fence.

The officers claimed that Ross fired a shot at them and left behind a kilo of cocaine in his trunk. But federal prosecutors, who later indicted the deputies on money-skimming and civil rights charges, said it was the officers who fired at Ross, then lied about finding the cocaine.

Shortly after that incident, Ross moved on to Ohio, where he became known on the streets as the "10-million-dollar man" because of the huge profits that he was believed to be making. When authorities indicted him there, he was able to cut his 10-year prison sentence in half by testifying in Los Angeles against the corrupt deputies.