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Sting Snares Drug Lord Who Vowed to Go Straight

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Ricky Donnell Ross, the legendary Los Angeles drug lord who vowed to pursue a legitimate business career after his release from prison last fall, has been indicted for allegedly purchasing 100 kilograms of cocaine from an undercover agent, authorities said Tuesday.

Ross, 35 — a charismatic, dreadlocked, ex-millionaire better known as Freeway Rick — could face a life sentence if convicted. He has pleaded not guilty and is being held without bail in a federal detention facility in San Diego County, where he was caught earlier this month in a Drug Enforcement Administration sting.

“I cussed his mom out, I cussed his brother out, and my mom and I cried together,” said Norman Tillman, one of Ross’ former partners who now works in a drug education program for the Chicago Housing Authority. “He was talking so positive, telling me in earnest how he was going to make it as big legitimately as he did illegitimately. He was going to prove it to the world.”

Ross rose to infamy in the 1980s, building South-Central Los Angeles’ first multimillion-dollar crack ring, then expanding his operation into a coast-to-coast conglomerate that sold more than 500,000 nuggets of the drug every day. His enterprise grew so large and so fast that Los Angeles authorities eventually formed the Freeway Rick Task Force, an elite squad of veteran detectives whose sole mission was to shut him down.

Instead, the officers became mired in the worst money-skimming scandal in local law enforcement history, which gave Ross a bargaining chip when he was finally arrested for interstate trafficking in 1989. In exchange for testifying against the officers who had hunted him, one of America’s top cocaine wholesalers walked out of prison last September after five years.

"I had no doubt that he was going to fall again," said ex-Los Angeles Police Detective Stephen Polak, a member of that squad, who pleaded guilty last fall to a misdemeanor civil rights violation. "I just didn't know it was going to be this soon."

His bankroll depleted, Ross returned from prison to live with his mother in Carson, talking confidently of applying his illicit entrepreneurial skills to legal business ventures. He did not apologize for his exploits. He said he had merely concluded that the drug trade was a no-win proposition and that legitimate investments would bring him greater rewards.

During the months that followed, he told The Times in a series of interviews after his parole, he hustled at a variety of odd jobs, helping out at construction sites, hauling trash and marketing a new clothing line. He insisted that he would go straight, but he also acknowledged that he missed the rush of pulling off clandestine, high-stakes deals.

"I'm still sick behind this stuff," Ross, who considered himself as much a slave to the drug as the addicts he exploited, said at the time. "I need my fix."

Soon after he was paroled, according to law enforcement authorities, Ross began getting involved in the drug trade again. In documents filed in U.S. District Court, officials allege that he and several cohorts met with a federal informant Feb. 23 in the San Diego area, where they discussed purchasing 100 kilos of cocaine.

Five days later, the informant returned with a veteran DEA agent posing as a Mexican trafficker with ties to a Colombian cartel. One of Ross' companions, Leroy M. Brown, who authorities say has ties to a Compton gang, allegedly told the agent that he would pay \$300,000 for the cocaine. On March 2, they all met again at a Denny's in Chula Vista, where Brown allegedly handed a bag of money to the undercover officer.

From there, they traveled to a Montgomery Ward parking lot in National City, where the officer handed over the keys to a Chevrolet Blazer filled with cocaine. Ross, according to court documents, allegedly opened the car and inspected the shipment. Federal agents swarmed the lot, arresting Brown and two others, then catching Ross after a brief pursuit.

"To me, it just seems like entrapment," said Ross' elder brother, David. "They set him up, and he evidently fell for it."

He added that the informant was an old narcotics acquaintance of his brother

who “just kept bugging him, calling and calling, but Ricky wasn’t doing anything like that anymore.”

Federal authorities, however, allege that Ross was more than just a passive middleman in the deal. But even if he was, said Jack Hook, the DEA’s spokesman in San Diego, brokering a narcotics transaction is still a violation of federal drug law. And for Ross, a twice-convicted felon who would be facing his “third strike,” the penalty would be just as severe.