

## **SUPPLIER TURNED INFORMANT BOOSTS CASE 4 METRO DETROIT COPS GET PRISON FOR DRUG ROLES**

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When four metro Detroit police officers agreed to transport and protect cocaine and marijuana shipments, they signed up with a drug distributor who had connections that stretched from Detroit to Colombia. They were in the big time. Little did they know the distributor, Roberto Rodriguez, would turn on them. He was a drug fugitive who counted members of Colombia's notorious Cali cocaine cartel among his friends. His suppliers shipped the drugs in truck trailers loaded on railroad cars. He changed his identity with ease, and said he made millions in his 20-year drug career. He once paid a Costa Rican surgeon with a \$12,000 Rolex watch for surgically altering his fingerprints, according to transcripts from a drug trial in Detroit. But soon after becoming one of the Detroit distributors for the Chicago-based Medina drug organization, Rodriguez, 44, had a change of heart. He went to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration and offered information about drug figures in Colombia, Mexico, Chicago, Miami and Detroit. His cooperation with the DEA, FBI and other law enforcement agencies eventually led to charges against more than 25 people, including the former deputy chief of the Royal Oak Township Police Department and one of the township's former officers, and two Highland Park public safety officers. For federal prosecutors in Detroit, Rodriguez, who was sentenced this fall to more than 17 years in prison, was a rare find, being so well connected with major drug traders. By the time Rodriguez's reign ended, the federal government had agreed to pay more than \$150,000 to move 40 of his relatives from Colombia and California to unknown locations in the United States. Rodriguez has expressed hope his cooperation will lead to a shorter sentence. "There's no doubt this guy was very significant," said Special Agent David Jacobson, DEA spokesman in Detroit. "He had a very significant impact here."

Rodriguez certainly changed the lives of the four metro Detroit officers. Three of the four pleaded guilty to charges related to cocaine trafficking. A fourth stood trial and was convicted. Former Royal Oak Township Deputy Chief Cecil Dawson, 49, of South-field was sentenced Dec. 8 to 10 years in prison; former Highland Park officer Albert Bursey, 47, was sentenced to the same term Dec. 17. Erwin Heard, 46, a former Highland Park officer, was sentenced in May to 15 months in federal prison. Albert Bursey's wife, Christine Bursey, 47, a former Royal Oak Township police officer, stood trial, was convicted and was sentenced Dec. 17 to 15 years and eight months in prison. Lawyers for Dawson and Christine Bursey could not be reached for comment recently. But Dawson apologized at his sentencing. Christine Bursey's lawyer, Ada Montgomery, suggested during her trial that Rodriguez plied the couple with money and gifts when they were financially vulnerable. Albert Bursey's lawyer, Don Ferris, declined comment about Rodriguez's testimony or his client's guilty plea. And Patrick Cleary, Heard's lawyer, said Heard was tempted by the promise of easy money when he was having financial problems. Heard quickly pleaded guilty and agreed to help the government, Cleary said. The four officers were among 11 people charged with cocaine trafficking in March 1997. Prosecutors brought Rodriguez to the witness stand for the first time during Christine Bursey's trial. She was convicted of drug trafficking but acquitted on a second count of conspiring to extort property. During four days on the witness stand in late February and early March, Rodriguez, a Cuban native, offered this story of how he came to Detroit: He fled the United States after being arrested in California with nearly 450 pounds of cocaine in 1988. He traveled to the Caribbean and Central and South America, eventually introducing Francisco Medina, a Mexican citizen, to his friends in Cali, Colombia. Medina wanted to transport cocaine from Colombia to the United States through Mexico, Rodriguez testified. Medina created a drug distribution center in Chicago, and Rodriguez returned to the United States in 1994, became a Medina distributor and moved to Detroit. He increased his shipments from 220-330 pounds to 660-880

pounds of cocaine, broken down and sold in smaller quantities. He later added marijuana to his product list. Through one of his pot customers, Rodriguez met the Burseys in late 1995 or early 1996, he testified. They knew him as Benjamin Rivera, and over dinner and some wine at Rodriguez's home, Albert Bursey told his new friend his operation could be protected if it were moved to Highland Park, Rodriguez testified. They sealed the deal late during a trip to Windsor. In December 1996, as Albert Bursey stood guard in uniform and his patrol car, Rodriguez's men unloaded 300 pounds of high-grade marijuana, he testified. Rodriguez paid Bursey \$8,000, according to a DEA affidavit. Ferris, Albert Bursey's lawyer, said the story was not true. A short time later, Rodriguez contacted the DEA in Miami. He missed his family, he testified, and he wanted out of the drug business. Twice in Detroit, someone had tried to kill him, he said. The DEA was interested in Medina's Chicago operation and Rodriguez's ties to the Mexican cartel. He also told agents about his connections in Detroit. When he returned to the Midwest, federal agents were watching every move. They wired him with recorders and monitored his calls. They planted video cameras in cars. Instead of distributing the drugs, he was now taking them to the DEA. From deals in the works, the DEA seized \$903,000 of marijuana and cocaine proceeds from suspects in Detroit. In all, Rodriguez would lead agents to more than 484 pounds of cocaine and over \$2 million. With his constant DEA handlers listening, Rodriguez resumed meeting with Christine and Albert Bursey, he testified. The couple looked for a stash house, and Albert Bursey would check Rodriguez's driver's license and car license plates on police computers to ensure there were no warrants. As the tapes rolled, Bursey even told Rodriguez about tips he learned in a DEA class for spotting drug dealers. Rodriguez paid them \$2,000 in February 1997 for protecting future shipments, he testified. The couple also introduced Rodriguez to Dawson, who agreed to take a \$5,000-a-month retainer to protect drug shipments, Rodriguez testified. The Burseys would get \$8,000. To seal the deal, the four grasped hands together in a car parked at a South-field restaurant, Rodriguez testified. As the DEA listened and watched, Albert Bursey and Heard drove a car loaded with fake and real cocaine from a warehouse near Metro Airport to Royal Oak Township on March 5, 1997. Christine Bursey drove a lookout car, and Dawson drove by to provide countersurveillance. He even gave a DEA agent posing as a drug courier an escort out of the township. After a second similar shipment, all were arrested, and Rodriguez's undercover work was over. His cooperation with the DEA left family members, who are not drug dealers, in Colombia and California in danger, he and government officials said. They had to give up jobs and homes and, in some cases, learn a new language. The decision to relocate 40 people indicates Rodriguez's importance. The federal government doesn't move every tipsier and his family, agents and prosecutors said, but an informant such as Rodriguez can accelerate and expand an investigation and bring the players together quickly. "It's like trying to read a book when the pages are scattered all over the country," said Richard Crock, the DEA's Detroit supervisor in the Rodriguez investigation. "Here's a guy who can bring you the whole book." For more information on the DEA visit [www.usdoj.gov/dea](http://www.usdoj.gov/dea) Tim Doran can be reached at 1-313-223-4543 or by E-mail at [doranfreepress.com](mailto:doranfreepress.com)