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Kingpin: 'I broke the code'

On the stand four days, Camden drug lord Raymond Morales ratted on major players. He did good business, he said. His regret: Testifying.

By Troy Graham
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In the last 15 years, perhaps no one has contributed more to the misery of drugs and violence on Camden's streets than Raymond Morales.

A former cocaine wholesale and retail kingpin, Morales secretly pleaded guilty in federal court in 2005 and helped investigators dismantle his organization and target his old customers.

For four days, Morales recently sat on the witness stand for the first time, testifying against three men with whom he did business, and giving a remarkably frank and chilling description of his long reign at the top of the drug world.

Wearing khaki prison garb and black-rimmed glasses, he talked in a steady, unwavering baritone about the six murders he ordered, about the vast sums of cocaine he moved, and the staggering amount of money that came back to him.

Through it all, Morales expressed no remorse. Under cross-examination, he simply said he made "the best business decisions for my business at the time."

The worst thing he ever did in his life, he said, was to help investigators and agree to testify.

"I broke the code. I broke the code that I lived and breathed," Morales said. "Me doing this puts me and my family in jeopardy."

Other than famed drug lord J.R. Rivera, whose prosecution reached into Camden City Hall and led to the conviction of former Mayor Milton Milani on corruption charges, no other figure has extended so deeply into the city's underworld.

At times, Morales's testimony sounded like a concise history of Camden's street-corner drug culture, complete with a who's who of the major players.

Morales, 35, of Puerto Rican descent, was raised in Camden's Whitman Park neighborhood in what he said was a stable, two-parent household.

Despite that, he started selling drugs as a teenager, lured by the desire, he said, to make as much money as fast as he could.

"I wanted to be a millionaire," he said. "I wanted to take care of my family."

Several of his brothers and cousins eventually worked for him and his drug empire.

Morales first caught the attention of local police in the early 1990s while working a marijuana set, or crew, at Atlantic and Coral Streets.

By 1993, he had joined with a group of Dominican wholesalers. The group's leader, Tony Rodriguez, owned two adjacent homes on Lansdowne Avenue known as the "million-dollar houses," supposedly for having \$1 million worth of drugs and money on hand at any time.

In 1994, Morales testified, Rodriguez wanted him to kill two men from New York and steal their drugs. Morales said he couldn't carry out the plan because he had injured his leg. Rodriguez took his place, armed with a Tech-9 semiautomatic weapon that Morales gave him.

Rodriguez, he said, killed both victims at a meeting at a Red Roof Inn in Mount Laurel. Those homicides are among only a handful that remain unsolved in Burlington County.

Police broke up Rodriguez's organization in 1995, and Morales was arrested. He served three years in prison and a halfway house on drug charges, running his business throughout that time. Rodriguez, free on bail, killed a Colombian wholesaler and his bodyguard in New York. He was sentenced to life in prison for those killings.

Morales said from the stand that he had developed his own source of cocaine, independent of Rodriguez - a dangerous bit of palace intrigue, because he said Rodriguez would have killed him if he had found out.

Morales' business ties to some of Camden's most notorious crime figures stretch back to the early 1990s, when he said he used the menacing Sons of Malcolm X street gang as muscle. Gang members eagerly provided their help so



Raymond Morales

they could have more access to his wholesale cocaine, he said.

The Sons controlled vast swaths of the North Camden drug trade for more than a decade and were best known for the 1992 "test night" shootings, in which gang members had to show their loyalty by killing random civilians. A former member, convicted as a juvenile in one of the test night shootings, is scheduled to testify this week.

Years later, a competitor tried to contract a hit on Morales with Leonard "Pooh" Paulk. Paulk, described as another of the city's largest wholesalers, warned Morales instead.

Paulk is the stepfather of Camden basketball legend Dajuan Wagner, who played three years for the NBA's Cleveland Cavaliers. Paulk was given a life sentence on drug conspiracy charges in federal court in 2005.

Morales's testimony also was remarkable for the way he described his business, dealing with many of the same issues as legitimate executives and applying many of the same economic theories.

For one, he offered a money-back guarantee on the quality of his drugs. And he griped from the stand about expenses cutting into his profit - though his expenses included paying bail bondsmen and lawyers and the toll of stick-up artists.

The wild card, of course, was the violence. Morales once had a drug dealer killed for representing his own, inferior cocaine as having come from Morales' supply.

"Nothing's normal in the drug trade," he said. "Every day's different."

Morales was wildly successful. Investigators said his business grew so large and was able to buy so much cocaine at once, that he drove out his competitors - a strategy not unlike Wal-Mart's.

At his height, Morales said, he was moving 70 kilos a month from his connection with a group of "Arizona Mexicans."

But he supplied the drug corner where he controlled the retail sale of crack - at Atlantic and Norris Streets - with a better-quality cocaine from a Colombian source in New York known as "Glasses."

His drug-corner "manager," Dennis Rodriguez, testified in this same trial that they pioneered the sale of \$5 bags of crack rather than the corner standard \$10 bags. Addicts, he said, often showed up with \$8 or \$9 and haggled.

The \$5 bags were a sensation.

"We were selling more coke than ever. Customers were coming out of everywhere," Rodriguez testified. "We were number one."

Rodriguez said he often saw the wholesale customers when they came to meet Morales at his front business, an auto body shop in Pennsauken.

He knew them only by their street names: Andos, Bear, Little Spanish Kid, Joey Crack, Tow-truck Guy, Jazz, Rockmyer, Conejo ("rabbit" in Spanish), Tito from Delaware and his brother, Nas.

It was that drug network that Morales brought down after he was arrested in 2003 while taking possession of 66 pounds of cocaine, driven from Arizona in a hidden compartment of a pickup.

With his cooperation, police dismantled four major drug sets, arrested nearly 60 people, and brought charges in several homicides.

Morales' recent testimony in federal court in Camden was for a case against three men: Ahmed Judge, Jevon Lewis and Mack Jones.

Morales said he contracted Lewis to kill Kenneth Fussell, who was gunned down in front of his Camden home in 2001. Morales said he later learned that Lewis had given the job to Judge.

Investigators believe Morales mistakenly identified Fussell as someone who shot his cousin in a botched robbery.

Morales has been in federal protective custody, pending his sentencing. Although he faces multiple life sentences, Morales said he hoped to be released one day. And, he said, he has discussed entering witness protection "if I ever got out."

Authorities won't say where he's being kept.

There has been some dispute during the trial about whether Morales has any money left - he testified that he blew thousands every week on prostitutes. Dennis Rodriguez said Morales told him he had stashed \$1.5 million.

Morales is likely to take the stand again, in the forthcoming trial of Juan Rivera-Velez, whom investigators called his "main hit man."

Rivera-Velez, known as "Two-face" because he was badly burned and disfigured in a car accident, is charged with killing Miguel Batista in 1996 on Morales' orders.

The three were sitting in Batista's car when Rivera-Velez fired, Morales testified last month.

Under cross-examination, Morales and Judge's defense attorney, Rocco Cipparone, engaged in a surreal exchange about whether Morales told investigators he was splattered with brains.

"I didn't stop to do forensics. It was a head shot," Morales said. "I had blood on me, so it's a possibility I could have had brains on me as well."

Cipparone also pressed Morales on the Red Roof Inn shootings. Morales has not been charged in those killings, but he said he didn't feel as though he was getting a free pass.

"The ones I ordered, I'm being held responsible for," he said.

"Would it be fair to say you're not cooperating out of a sense of conscience?" Cipparone asked later.

"Yes," Morales answered.

"Your sole motivation is self-preservation?"

"Yes."

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