

Painstaking sting operation cracks drug ring

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On the night of March 10, 1989, Jose Torrez Alvarez told his two dinner companions he had saved enough from his drug-trafficking operation so he'd never have to work again if he didn't want to.

During two hours of eating and conversation, Alvarez, 31, of Las Lomas, said he had used drug profits to buy two small cattle ranches in Michoacan state, Mexico, where his mother and some family members lived.

What Alvarez didn't know as he

spilled out his story was that the people he was eating with were part of an undercover team that had been investigating him and making periodic drug purchases. The agents had been working the case for four months, according to an affidavit for a search warrant on file in federal court in San Jose.

Drug agents knew they were working on a big case, because Alvarez had already said he could supply any quantity of drugs, the affidavit said. Two weeks after that dinner meeting, authorities

got approval for a device that showed where calls from Alvarez's home at 10 Boling Road were going.

The tracing of those calls helped pinpoint more people suspected of participating in the drug operation. But it wasn't until April of this year, when wire-taps allowing listening in were approved, that agents knew the full scope of the trafficking Alvarez is accused of heading.

Over a two-month period, agents listened in on 1,000 narcotics-related conversations, the

affidavit said, that indicated Alvarez was "in control of a major narcotics trafficking operation" and that he obtained the drugs in Los Angeles.

The trafficking operation was doing more than \$2.8 million in cocaine a month, authorities said after arresting Alvarez and 45 others in 28 simultaneous early-morning raids June 20. Half of the raids were in the Pajaro Valley.

On May 2, according to the court documents, Alvarez was able to sell 20 kilograms (about

44 pounds) of cocaine, with a street value of \$560,000, in three hours.

The scope of the trafficking "surprised everybody," said Ron Brooks, commander of the Santa Cruz County Narcotics Enforcement Team, part of a multi-agency task force that included local, state and federal authorities.

Of the 46 people arrested, 16 are facing drug-selling charges in federal court, where penalties are tougher than in state and local courts. Six people facing federal

charges are still at large, including the man accused of being the No. 3 man in the trafficking. All the people facing federal charges were indicted by a federal grand jury last week.

The affidavit for the search warrant, filed in federal court by an investigator, describes Alvarez, 31, and his brother, Miguel, also 31, as heading a "loosely knit, largely Hispanic network of several sub-groups with numerous familial relation-

See DRUG RING page 9 ►

✓CF CRIME &
CRIMINALS RP 7/9/90

DRUG RING

P. 7

► From page 1

ships."

In those sub-groups, the affidavit said, dealers would supply drugs to other dealers of approximately the same level, as well as their own clients and sub-dealers. Alvarez, the affidavit said, was making regular trips to Los Angeles to pick up drugs.

CNET's Brooks said the traffickers dealt more with Hispanics than Anglos, and were a little more cautious about selling to Anglos.

Miguel Alvarez, the affidavit said, was a conduit for distribution of drugs (primarily cocaine) in the Modesto area, and was in the trafficking as deeply as his brother.

Other than the description of Jose Alvarez's own conversations about where his drug profits were going, the affidavit provides limited information about the man.

Jose Alvarez told an undercover agent that he always carried an automatic pistol with him, although he was not armed when he was arrested.

On one occasion, the affidavit said, Alvarez said he had saved enough to buy some local property. Alvarez also told agents he had no bank accounts.

In interviews this week, investigators said they believe Alvarez did not use drugs himself; they said the major dealers are usually non-users.

Marty London, of the Drug Enforcement Administration, said Alvarez once worked for a mushroom company in the Pajaro Valley. His residence, a mobile home and adjacent wood-frame building, would attract little attention.