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Anatomy of a heroin ring

Dana Bostic's gang-affiliated west-side drug organization employed dozens of residents, served thousands of customers, established ties with Mexican drug cartels, and relied on violence to stay in business.

By Mick Dumke

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At first it seemed like just another senseless shooting in an already violent summer. A little after 4 AM on Monday, August 18, 2008, two men were fired on as they sat in a Mercedes outside the Rock 'n' Roll McDonald's. By the time police arrived four minutes later, the Mercedes was on its way to Stroger Hospital. The 29-year-old driver had been shot five times; the passenger, his younger brother, was declared dead on arrival at Stroger. From the little information police were able to piece together at the time, the slaying seemed to have stemmed from an altercation at Excalibur, the popular nightclub a couple blocks away.

Area residents and bar patrons expressed alarm, noting that shootings don't usually happen in low-crime River North, and certainly not at heavily trafficked tourist stops like the landmark McDonald's. To some, it was the latest sign that bloodshed seemed

to be spreading everywhere that summer—even the Taste of Chicago had been marred by a deadly shooting as thousands of people left the fireworks show on the Fourth of July. The city was well on its way to more than 500 murders for the year, the highest total since 2003. Even more troubling, police were able to identify suspects in only about a third of them.

The slaying outside the McDonald's would remain one of the open cases. What led to the gunfire—and how it was connected to a string of other violent acts around the city—wouldn't become evident for another two years, after an investigation led deep into a highly profitable heroin ring on the west side that employed dozens of residents, served thousands of customers from around the midwest, and had ties to Mexican drug cartels.

What turned out to be most notable about the operation, though, was how typical it was. The DEA estimates that 80 percent of the heroin and cocaine sold in Chicago originates with the Sinaloa cartel in Mexico. Distributors here extend the cartel's reach by connecting with street gangs. The gangs, in turn, hasten the decline of distressed communities into open-air drug markets through their skillful use of product promotion, their ability to offer job opportunities where there are few, and their willingness, when necessary, to use violence to stay in business.

The survivor of the River North shooting had the attention of authorities even before he left the hospital. His name was Dana Bostic, and he was the older brother of Curtis Ellis, who'd been fatally shot in the seat next to him. Not long after Bostic was hospitalized, Mahogany Barbee, his longtime girlfriend, rushed in to see him. The couple lived together with their children in suburban Aurora, not far from where she worked as a nurse's assistant. To her and the couple's friends and family, Bostic was loyal and generous, known for lending money when anyone was short and organizing block parties or boat outings for special occasions.

Police, though, knew him as "Bird," a big guy—6'2" and heavyset, with a large round face and a scar on his forehead—who was a longtime member of the New Breeds street gang based on Chicago's west side.

Investigators learned that earlier that night Bostic and his brother had been at Excalibur, where they'd scuffled with a group that included NBA player Tony Allen, a native west-sider who had just signed a new two-year, \$5 million contract with the Boston Celtics.

It wasn't the first time Allen had been in a fight with members of the New Breeds. In 2005, he and several friends from the old neighborhood got into a confrontation at the White Palace Grill in the South Loop that ended with one man shot and another suffering a fractured eye socket. Allen was eventually acquitted of aggravated battery.

Bostic and his brother weren't involved in the 2005 fight, but friends of theirs were, including two men who sued Allen for damages in civil court. "There was some notoriety amongst his crew," Commander Joe Gorman, the former head of the Chicago

Police Department's gang investigations section, recalled of Bostic. "Him and Tony Allen, there were some confrontations amongst those groups."

As police tried to find out more about the Rock 'n' Roll McDonald's shooting, Bostic received another visitor in the hospital: Maurice Davis, a fellow member of the New Breeds who'd grown up with Bostic and his brother. Davis was a tough character. Nicknamed Capone, he was 6'4" and weighed 235 pounds. He was 22 at the time and had been selling drugs since he was 14, typically while high, since he smoked marijuana and used ecstasy every day. He'd been incarcerated for heroin possession and domestic battery, and had a girlfriend who was just 16. He was also a loyal soldier who was known to carry a gun.

Davis had hurried to the hospital as soon as he learned of Ellis's death. As he later recalled, Bostic didn't mince words about what had happened to his brother: "He just said Curt got shot in the head." And according to Davis, Bostic was just as direct about whom he considered responsible: the Takers, or Undertaker Vice Lords, whom the New Breeds had been at odds with for years. Bostic and Davis believed some of them were friends with Tony Allen and had played a role in the shooting in 2005 in addition to the one earlier that morning.

Bostic left the hospital a few hours after being admitted. That evening, according to Davis, he held a meeting in an apartment he rented for friends at 4019 W. Van Buren, a two-story brick building painted green with neat white trim, in a part of West Garfield Park known as K-Town because the north-south street names all start with K. Bostic later denied being part of any of the gang's violent activity, but Davis's account of what happened at the meeting couldn't be more different. Davis said he and most of the other top members of their clique were present as Bostic issued unequivocal orders. "Bird said it was a green light on everybody," Davis recalled. "It's time to go to war . . . [on] whoever had something to do with Curt getting killed."

Everyone there knew that Bostic didn't tolerate dissent, according to Davis and others—stories had circulated for years about his willingness to hurt members of his own organization who stepped out of line.

He told the group that anyone who didn't want to be part of it needed to "get the fuck home," Davis recounted. Nobody did.

The New Breeds had been at the center of conflicts over shifting gang alliances and drug territory for years. The gang was formed in the 1980s when members of the Black Gangsters broke away from their leadership. But the splinter group soon became the more prominent, and within a decade the New Breeds swallowed up the BGs.

In 2010 federal authorities charged Dana Bostic and two dozen of his associates with running a sophisticated heroin ring on Chicago's west side. Below are several key court documents (PDFs) detailing the case: a two-part criminal

By the 1990s the New Breeds were notorious for their use of violence to protect heroin and crack territory, especially in vicious conflicts on the west side with factions of the Vice Lords. In 1996, 102 people were murdered in the 11th police district, which includes the neighborhoods of West Humboldt Park and East and West Garfield Park; that figure

accounted for more than one of every eight murder victims in the entire city. Even when the west-side homicide count began to drop in subsequent years, the drug markets remained in place. Police made thousands of arrests annually for the possession or delivery of crack and heroin, and federal authorities announced crackdowns on west-side drug operations run by the New Breeds every year from 2004 to 2007. Yet dealers continued to openly hawk their wares in communities crippled by poverty and disinvestment.

Bostic grew up in the middle of the west side's toxic drug landscape. He was three when his father was sent to prison. His mother's next long-term boyfriend—Curt Ellis's father—was bludgeoned to death. Bostic's mother sank into a heroin addiction and, by most accounts, frequently left her children to fend for themselves. When Bostic was eight, state child welfare workers gave his grandmother custody of the kids, but she was overwhelmed by the 12 people crammed into her one-bedroom apartment. She died within the year. Bostic later said he could recall "regularly eating half a loaf of bread per day and nothing else."

Bostic sought refuge the first place he could find it—on the street, where neighborhood drug dealers served as mentors and caregivers, buying him pizza and teaching him how to earn his own spending money. He started selling marijuana at 12. A year later, he took an entry-level job in the heroin trade, making about \$8 an hour to alert street dealers when police were in the area.

At age 14, Bostic was placed in a group home, where he said supervision was lax. He stopped going to school and, when he wasn't being held in a juvenile detention facility for carrying a gun and stealing a car, he moved up the hierarchy of the drug trade. At best, he was able to read at a grade school level.

In 2000, Bostic, then 20, was arrested near the corner of Pulaski and Gladys after police said they saw him selling a small baggie of crack. Bostic contested the charge, saying he was simply hanging out with a lifelong friend named Eleazar Alves. A county judge found Bostic guilty, but let him off with a year of probation.

It wasn't Bostic's first run-in with police—he'd previously been arrested for gambling, disorderly conduct, and unlawful use of a weapon. What was significant this time, though, was his mention of Alves. Known on the street as Boodro or Dro, Alves

complaint and transcripts of Bostic's two-day sentencing hearing in August 2012.

CRIMINAL COMPLAINT, PART ONE

CRIMINAL COMPLAINT, PART TWO

SENTENCING HEARING, DAY ONE

SENTENCING HEARING, DAY TWO

controlled drug sales in the blocks around Van Buren and Pulaski, authorities and other dealers said. Bostic had become one of his top deputies, they alleged, with a reputation for securing territory through violence and intimidation.

Bostic has always denied the allegations—including in 2002, when he was charged with homicide for the slaying of a member of the rival Undertakers. The murder was one of 648 in Chicago that year, including 70 in the 11th District alone. The story is hard to piece together because of the lack of cooperation and shifting accounts of witnesses. It's a roadblock investigators encounter regularly, and the major reason so few murder cases are solved.

What's clear is that around 9 PM on May 19, 2002, a New Breed was shot in the leg in a vacant lot near Gladys and Pulaski. Later that night, a rival Undertaker was shot and killed about a mile away, on Kilpatrick. Bostic claimed he had an alibi that night: he was with one of his neighbors the whole

time. But she told police Bostic didn't come to her house until well after the Kilpatrick shooting. When police asked her to give a written statement, however, she changed her story and then declined to cooperate further.

A couple weeks later, a man who survived the Kilpatrick shooting told police the perpetrator was a guy everyone knew as "Bird" and identified Bostic in a photograph. The witness said he didn't share the information sooner because "he was afraid that 'Bird' or his gang would kill him," according to the police report.

The witness later recanted during the trial. Still, a Cook County judge found Bostic guilty of first-degree murder—but not for long. Bostic's attorney filed a motion asking the judge to reconsider in light of the shifting witness accounts, and the conviction was reversed.

The acquittal only enhanced Bostic's intimidating street reputation, according to authorities. And by that time, Bostic had a lot at stake that depended on it.

A year before the Undertaker slaying, Bostic's younger brother, Ellis, began recruiting Davis and other old friends to help run a drug operation headed by Boodro, Bostic's boss and mentor, at Van Buren and Pulaski.

A man who survived the shooting told police the perpetrator was a guy everyone knew as "Bird." The witness said he didn't share the information sooner because "he was afraid that 'Bird' or his gang would kill him."

They started working for the operation the way Bostic had been indoctrinated years earlier: keeping an eye out for cops. As they demonstrated their reliability, they were promoted to street sellers.

But within a year, Boodro was shot and killed at a block party. Friends and police say everyone understood that Bostic was taking over his drug operation.

Bostic quickly established his leadership style—and he didn't tolerate sloppy mistakes. Davis's cousin Ladonta Gill found that out the hard way. Gill was like the other members of the organization—he'd grown up in the neighborhood under the roughest of conditions. His father was out of the picture. Gill's mother sold heroin and left his sister to care for him, except that his sister was a heroin addict who often disappeared, leaving him to spend the night by himself in the back of a truck. His grandmother was incarcerated for killing his aunt. Gill hung out on the streets with Ellis and the other guys in the gang, who called him Bam. He started selling heroin when he was 16.

None of that inspired mercy when Gill reported being robbed of \$400 in heroin proceeds that he owed the boss. "Bostic didn't believe me," Gill said. As punishment, Bostic broke Gill's hand with a baseball bat.

But Bostic also had a softer side. In 2001 he started dating Barbee, then 23, a fellow west-sider and a nurse's assistant who worked in the suburbs. Barbee had also grown up amid drugs, gangs, and violence—she recalled seeing several people killed near her home, and if she and family members wanted to go to the store, they frequently had to use the back door and alley to avoid fighting or gunfire on the street. Two of her brothers had sold drugs and become leaders of the Unknown Vice Lords, but she had moved to the south side to get away from the life.

Barbee later said that Bostic initially told her he lived in Minnesota and was just back in town visiting. But as they spent more time together she realized that he was a drug dealer. "I noticed that Bird had money," she said, though "Bird hasn't had a job in the time I have known him."

Still, the couple moved in together, first in Berwyn and then in nicer homes ever farther from their old neighborhood—in Cicero, Woodridge, and finally Aurora. In December 2003, they had a baby girl. Barbee said she avoided talking to Bostic about his work, since it only led to fights, though she agreed to rent cars for him, and to register his Mercedes in her name.

And she recalled that after Bostic and his brother were shot at the McDonald's in 2008, a number of Bird's friends showed up at their home with

"His half brother was 25. We had information that he was going to kill 25 rivals for the killing of his half brother."

guns. "They were standing outside the house to make sure nothing else happened," she said.

**—CPD Commander Joe Gorman,
former head of the gang
investigations section, describing
Dana Bostic**

After Ellis was killed, police heard murmurs that Bostic was planning retaliation.

"His half brother was 25," says Gorman, then the police department's top gang investigator. "We had information that he was going to kill 25 rivals for the killing of his half brother."

But Bostic himself stayed away from the violence, allegedly instructing his underlings to get ready for war. And they did.

"I got me a gun," Davis later explained. He said several were stored in the gang's apartment at 4019 W. Van Buren. He then went and found one of the organization's street dealers—Cornelius Thomas, nicknamed Bunny—who was also an expert at stealing cars. Bunny knew the drill—he got the call every time his supervisors were preparing to do a drive-by shooting. Davis, Bunny, and several others drove around in Davis's blue Stratus looking for something suitably nondescript.

But along the way they got word that several Undertakers had been seen outside a store on Madison and Kostner. They sped over, and within minutes two of the men jumped out of the Stratus and began firing.

No one was killed, and Davis and the others fled as police arrived.

But that wasn't the case three nights later, on August 21, 2008. That night, Davis got behind the wheel of his Stratus. He said Gill—the fellow New Breed whose hand Bostic had broken years earlier—was in the passenger seat, and other New Breeds trailed them in a stolen Impala. Gill, however, denied being there.

Davis said they cruised the west side looking for Undertakers, until finally they passed a guy they knew as D-Low—Davon Taylor, 27, the cousin of one of the guys who'd been in the fight at Excalibur. A woman was in the car with Taylor.

Davis did a U-turn and pulled up alongside Taylor at a light so he and his friends could make sure it was the right guy. Then they followed him to a gas station at Chicago and Laramie. When Taylor stepped out to fill up, Davis said he pulled up alongside him and instructed Gill to be careful not to hurt the woman. "I told him, 'Go on ahead,'" Davis said, but "'don't shoot the bitch.'"

A security camera captured footage of what happened next: a man in a white T-shirt casually stepped out of the Stratus, got a good look at Taylor, and then shot him once in the back and once in the head.

"He got back in the car, and we left," Davis said. He was careful not to speed or otherwise attract notice.

With his brother gone, Bostic promoted his brother-in-law Lee Floyd to serve as his second-in-command, according to friends and investigators. Bostic's lifelong friend Charles Cowart—whom everyone called Maniac—also took on more responsibility in making sure street dealers had enough product to sell. It's common for the leaders of drug organizations, from street gangs to cartels, to surround themselves with top aides who are family members or lifelong friends—people they can trust because of their blood ties and shared financial stake in the business.

It's also common for the chain of command to be broken by eruptions of violence.

On the evening of June 22, 2009—Father's Day—Bostic held what had become an annual barbecue in honor of his predecessor and friend Boodro. Dozens were gathered on a lot behind Melody school, at Congress and Keeler, when a couple young women came by and informed Bostic's crew that a friend was out of prison and ready to take over area drug sales.

Bostic told them to go away, but Cowart—Maniac—wasn't as levelheaded. Punches were thrown, friends of the girls showed up as reinforcements, and a full fight broke out. When someone started shooting, a little after midnight, Cowart shot back—but instead of hitting his enemies, he shot Floyd. Police reported that Floyd was dropped off at Stroger Hospital by a group of males who then fled. He died early the next morning.

Cowart was arrested four days later and charged with first-degree murder and being an armed habitual criminal.

Bostic was running out of trusted deputies. This time, rather than promote from within, he looked outside the organization for help—to Brandon Richards, a childhood friend of Bostic's slain brother.

According to numerous accounts, Richards was different from Bostic and many of the others in the organization. Like them, he'd grown up without a father amid the neighborhood drug markets. But he'd finished high school, moved out of the city to suburban Bellwood, taken a straight job as a restaurant cook, and stayed involved in his young daughter's life. Ellis had urged Richards to stick with "honest work." Everybody called him Smooth.

But Bostic had always been like a big brother to Richards. When Bostic got in touch and said there was no one else he could trust, Richards agreed to help.

By June 2009, antigang and antiviolence units of the police department were ready to zoom in on Bostic's organization. That month, police sat down for a chat with a high-ranking member of the operation who was incarcerated. In later court documents, he was referred to as "Confidential Informant 1."

The informant laid out the structure of the organization for the police. No one had formal titles, he said, but the hierarchy, production process, and compensation system were well established.

Several times a week, he would join Bostic and sometimes Richards in driving a rental car to buy 100 or 200 grams of heroin from a supplier. Then they'd take the haul to an apartment and prepare it to be sold: they'd mix it with over-the-counter pharmaceuticals like Dormin and other antihistamines to increase its bulk (and decrease its purity); wrap one-tenth-gram portions in tinfoil; and place the packets into small plastic baggies, often blue or pink to distinguish their product from competitors'. The baggies were bundled with plastic strips in groups of 14 known as packs or "jabs."

The informant said he would then get in touch with another member of the organization, whose job was to pick up the packaged heroin and connect with other street managers, known as runners. The runners would distribute jabs to street dealers. Each baggie sold for \$10. The dealers were responsible for turning \$120 over to the runners for each pack, meaning they could keep two baggies or \$20 for themselves every time they sold a dozen. The runners kept another \$20 and turned \$100 over to Richards.

"CI-1 said that most members of the New Breeds' clique have their own customer base," authorities later reported, "but all of the members of the clique go through CI-1 and Bostic to purchase heroin."

He said their home base was the apartment on Van Buren. On average days, the operation brought in \$4,000 to \$6,000; on good days, such as the first of the month, they could haul in \$10,000, the informant said. In other words, they were selling between 400 and a thousand dime bags of heroin a day, much of it to buyers who appeared to be from the suburbs or out of state.

The informant added that the organization also had its own wholesale customers who often bought larger portions of heroin.

The police understood they were looking at a highly profitable street business with a clear management structure. Bostic "ruled by violence and people weren't going to question his authority," says Commander Gorman. "It got to the point where he didn't have to be out there on the street. He lived out in the suburbs, but he was in charge."

They also realized that the operation had ties to a significant source of heroin. That's when they asked for assistance from the feds. "Joe Gorman sees the volume of dope coming in and out, and he recognizes that this is more than a street-level organization," says Jack Riley, the special agent in charge of the Chicago division of the Drug Enforcement Agency. "He sees the violence and the history of the guys. And when we see there's a Mexican connection, we say, 'Let's go.'"

Since Bostic was the center of the investigation, they called it "Operation Bird Cage."

Just after 6 AM on October 24, 2009, a potential drug customer called a cell phone number used to make heroin buys from Bostic's crew. The buyer asked for \$100 worth and the person on the other end agreed to meet in the parking lot of a grocery store at Pulaski and Congress. The customer said he'd be driving a green Dodge. When he pulled into the lot less than half an hour later, a man dressed in black approached him and cautiously handed him a dozen pink baggies. The man said his name was Mike—which wasn't his real name, as most dealers used street nicknames or aliases to conceal their real identities—and gave the buyer a new phone number to call anytime he needed something. He also asked for feedback on the quality of the product. "Call me and tell me what you think of it," Mike said. "Everybody's been telling me it's good."

"Mike" didn't realize that he'd just sold to an undercover cop.

Once the police had confirmed that the substance in the baggie was heroin, they wanted to know who "Mike" really was. They found their opportunity a couple hours later, when they saw him driving a van with temporary plates and pulled him over. After he presented a license showing his name was Cornelius Thomas, they let him go.

Thomas, otherwise known as Bunny, wasn't always fooled. In November, he noticed an undercover officer in a car near the site of an arranged deal. Instead of making the sale, he kept on walking and got on the phone to warn his coworkers.

Yet as careful as Bostic and his crew were, they were sloppy at other points, even as the investigation slowly moved closer to the top.

In late November 2009, Bostic was pulled over and arrested on drunk driving and heroin charges. For the next couple weeks, he spoke openly over the jail phone with Richards, his top deputy, even though it's well known that authorities regularly monitor calls in and out of correctional facilities.

Bostic grew upset as Richards informed him that he'd also been pulled over by police, that the organization's heroin supplies were dwindling, and that receipts had come up short. But what really touched a nerve was when Richards told him that Cowart—Maniac—seemed to be succumbing to the stress of murder charges stemming from the barbecue shooting.

"Man, Maniac sounded like he was finna cry," Richards said.

Bostic came across as unsympathetic, noting that they were facing heat from authorities since the melee. "If he wouldn't've smack that bitch, that shit would've never happened, man." Cowart was eventually convicted and sentenced to 51 years in state prison.

Meanwhile, police were also gleaning information from sources outside of Bostic's operation—info that led back to Bostic. They'd recently spoken with informants close to a leader of the Dirty Unknown Vice Lords who controlled a section of the Austin

neighborhood near Chicago and Laramie. The informants told them that even though Bostic was supposedly in a rival organization, the two gang leaders hung out regularly. More important to the investigation, the source said that Bostic had become the other organization's heroin supplier. The authorities weren't surprised—at the highest levels, they say, gang identification is often far less important than business relationships. "You see how the leaders of different gangs are working together through a common source," says Gorman, the former CPD antigang commander.

The key was finding what that source was. Rather than rounding up Bostic at this point, authorities wanted to see where the heroin trail led. Over the next few months, they found out by listening to lots and lots of phone calls.

On some of them, they say, Richards arranged money collection and received updates from street managers on the day's sales figures, heroin supply levels, and news of street workers who'd been busted or violated the terms of their employment. Such was the case in February 2010, when Maurice Davis caught Thomas, aka Bunny, selling heroin at a time Bostic's organization didn't have any of its product out on the street—meaning, in other words, that Thomas was freelancing without permission. Davis reported that he sent someone to "smack him down all types of shit." Like a good soldier, Thomas took the beating without fighting back.

More significantly, the authorities say they were able to track calls discussing pickups of heroin. Then they started witnessing the pickups themselves.

When Bostic's brother-in-law and top deputy, Lee Floyd, was killed in June 2009, Eddie Valentino was faced with a dilemma.

Valentino was 24 at the time and had grown up in Bucktown. He was wiry, with a long face and long hair he wore in a ponytail. He was a regular pot smoker and had been caught with it once, but the case was thrown out and he hadn't been in any other real trouble. He knew some guys who dealt drugs, including his own brother, but Valentino had stayed away, working straight jobs at fast-food restaurants and a lumberyard.

That changed around 2008, when Floyd asked if he had any connections to heroin. Valentino and Floyd had become friends after meeting at a barbecue a few years earlier, and Floyd had then introduced Valentino to his friend "Freak"—another of Bostic's nicknames. When Floyd inquired about a heroin connection, Valentino decided to help him out—and help himself out, too. He got in touch with Erik Guevara, a guy he'd grown up with. Guevara, in his mid-20s, had a relative in Mexico who could get him cocaine and heroin.

Valentino realized he could make some quick cash as a go-between. He would buy 100 grams of heroin from Guevara for \$6,000, then sell it to Floyd—and, by extension, Bostic—for \$6,500 to \$6,800. Valentino understood Bostic had people dealing it for him on the street.

This went on for a few months. But after Floyd was slain at the barbecue, Valentino was wary of dealing directly with Bostic. "I was afraid of him because he is a known gang member," Valentino said. But he knew Floyd's widow—Bostic's sister—and she assured him it would be all right.

When it came time for deliveries, Valentino and Bostic, and usually one of his deputies, would meet at a designated spot on the west side or in nearby Berwyn or Cicero, almost always in a public place such as the parking lot of a Walgreens or gas station, apparently as a way of hiding in plain sight.

But it turned out that they weren't hidden at all. By the spring of 2010, officials were regularly following the transactions with wiretaps and in-person surveillance.

On May 3, 2010, investigators listened in as Bostic called Valentino and wondered why he hadn't been in touch for days. Valentino said he was just about to call, but Bostic didn't buy it.

"Man, you weren't finna do shit," Bostic said.

Valentino explained that he meant to call back the day before, until he'd showed up for his bowling league and realized it was the last night of the season. "I didn't get out of bowling 'til like six-thirty, man," he said. "But I'm right here leaving the crib. You want me to come by?"

Bostic told him he was a "goofball" but yes. That was noon. It was almost 4 PM before Valentino was able to make his delivery in the parking lot of a diner at Roosevelt and Central—to Richards, since Bostic was actually vacationing in Las Vegas at the time.

Richards then met up with Gill at an apartment in Cicero, and the two of them cut the heroin for street sale. In the meantime, Valentino went to a nearby gas station, where agents watched him get into a Volkswagen driven by Guevara, his supplier. A couple minutes later Valentino got back into his car and left, while Guevara drove to a house in Berwyn and switched cars before heading to his home in the city.

The next day, police watched as one of Bostic's street managers distributed heroin packets to salesmen in front of the apartment at 4019 W. Van Buren.

When officers approached, the manager took off. Half a block up Van Buren, police said they saw him throw three bags in a vacant lot. Each was stamped with a gold crown insignia to market it as a New Breeds product.

A few minutes later, a woman left the apartment building wearing a red backpack. When police stopped her, they found nearly 16 grams of heroin, with a street value of at least \$2,000.

It fell on Richards to call Bostic with the bad news of the bust—including the fact that the police had seized all that product. Bostic was in disbelief.

"I should've stayed in Vegas," he said.

Several months later, in late July 2010, federal agents finally got the big break they were waiting for: they listened in as Valentino's friend and heroin source Erik Guevara talked on his phone about the arrival of a large shipment.

Guevara, a chunky guy nicknamed "Fat Ass," was careful about whom he dealt with personally. Yet he often seemed to go about business with little urgency. Valentino frequently bickered with him about his habit of sleeping in after a night of drinking or showing up for appointments hours late.

This time Guevara was the one who was annoyed. One of the guys working for him had called and said they'd encountered a problem—they couldn't get into the compartment of the Dodge Dakota where the heroin shipment had been hidden.

Guevara told them to try turning the screw the other way. When that didn't work, he suggested they "just kick the motherfucker." That didn't do the trick either. Finally, realizing he was going to have to take care of it himself, Guevara drove to Home Depot and met the men at a house in suburban Franklin Park. Authorities covertly watched as he worked with several other men on the Dakota parked in the yard.

The next day officers saw one of Guevara's workers take a drive shaft from the truck and place it in the back of Guevara's Jeep. When he drove off, they followed him. Guevara headed slowly toward the city, driving about ten miles an hour under the speed limit, until swerving onto the Austin exit from the Eisenhower. Police pulled him over after a few blocks.

As one officer asked him to step out of the car for a search, the other quietly took the drive shaft from the Jeep's rear compartment. The police asked Guevara to get back into the Jeep while they supposedly ran his name—but instead they sped back to the 11th district police station, where they found almost eight kilograms of suspected heroin in the crankshaft's tubes. They estimated it was worth well more than \$1 million on the street.

In late July 2010, federal agents finally got the big break they were waiting for: they listened in as Eddie Valentino's friend and heroin source Erik Guevara talked on his phone about the arrival of a large shipment.

On an August morning in 2010, Bostic listened as his longtime girlfriend, Mahogany Barbee, tried to convince him to turn himself in. The couple and their children had been staying in a suburban hotel, but friends had started to call and text her to say that the authorities were looking for Bird and it

was all over the news. Barbee pulled the stories up on her laptop—how 25 people had been named in a sealed 230-page criminal complaint filed a day earlier in district court, charging them with conspiracy to possess and distribute heroin. "Heroin bust a blow to street gang," the *Sun-Times* headline declared.

"I remember it said that he would make \$10,000 a day," Barbee would later recall to investigators. "Bird was sitting across the table from me. I asked him if it was true, and he said, 'Hell, no.' I was wondering where all the money was that the police said he had made."

Barbee added: "He knew he was going to jail, since this was a federal case."

The next day—Friday, August 13—federal marshals caught up with the couple as they tried to slip out the back of a home in suburban Villa Park where one of Bostic's friends lived—one of the guys who'd been in the fight with NBA player Tony Allen at the White Palace Grill in 2005. Barbee was charged with harboring a fugitive.

Over the next few months, several key members of the organization agreed to cooperate with the investigation in return for the consideration of lighter sentences, including Valentino, who sold heroin to Bostic; Thomas, the street dealer and car thief; and, most significantly, Maurice Davis, who provided graphic details of several unsolved shootings, most of them stemming from a years-long feud between the New Breeds and the Undertaker Vice Lords.

One by one, in 2011 and 2012, each of the defendants pleaded guilty, typically to a single one of the multiple counts against them. Their sentences varied depending on their cooperation and level of involvement. Richards, who'd served as Bostic's lieutenant for a little more than a year but had no significant criminal history, was sentenced to 184 months. Guevara, who admitted to supplying heroin to the New Breeds and a number of other gangs, received a 360-month sentence. After

"Bird was sitting across the table from me. I asked him if it was true, and he said, 'Hell, no.' I was wondering where all the money was that the police said he had made."

**—Dana "Bird" Bostic's girlfriend,
Mahogany Barbee**

cooperating, Valentino—the liaison between Guevara and Bostic's crew—got a relatively light 71 months.

Despite admitting his involvement in a number of shootings, Davis was sentenced to 20 years after cooperating. Gill denied Davis's accusation that he was one of Bostic's hired shooters—and responsible for the retaliation killing for Bostic's brother's death—but still got 329 months.

Gill's attorney, Jerry Bischoff, stresses that Gill admitted to being a midlevel heroin dealer but was never proven to shoot anyone. He argues that the federal government's use of cooperating witnesses with a history of lying—like Davis—is "reckless" and unfair, especially when combined with heavy mandatory sentences for drug crimes.

"It's good we're getting some of these guys off the street," says Bischoff, a former Cook County prosecutor. "But a lot of low-level guys get locked up for what amounts to murder time. They're born into this environment and you can predict how they're going to end up."

Last February Bostic pleaded guilty to a single count of conspiring to distribute 1,000 grams or more of substances containing heroin. At his sentencing hearing six months later, he told Judge Matthew F. Kennelly that he had nothing to do with the violence. "Yes, I sold drugs," he said. But "I didn't tell these people to do none of that."

The judge wasn't moved. "Running a heroin ring alone is very damaging—to the people involved in selling who are going to prison, to the addicts, to the neighborhood," he said. "Mr. Bostic is not out there pulling any triggers, I agree with that. He's very well insulated. He's like most CEOs. There's people that take the weight for him. . . . And, you know, violence is part of running a business like that.

"What Mr. Bostic did was victimizing people who lived in his community."

Judge Kennelly sentenced Bostic to 38 years in federal prison.

After years of covert surveillance, wiretaps, and legal work by local and federal officials, 24 of the 25 indicted coconspirators in Operation Bird Cage have been convicted, including one scheduled to be sentenced this week. Just one defendant remains a fugitive.

Local and federal officials say the case illustrates their commitment to using resources on the street and in the courtroom to eliminate drug markets. The U.S. Attorney's office in Chicago charges about 100 defendants annually for being part of major drug conspiracies, each one the result of months or even years of intense investigation.

Riley, the head DEA agent in Chicago, says the feds are no longer interested in seeing how much dope they can seize—their goal is to disrupt organized-crime networks, especially those with suspected ties to Mexican cartels, and to send the message that perpetrators will spend much of their remaining lives in prison.

"Did we completely eliminate drug trafficking in Chicago? No," Riley says of the Bostic investigation. "But it eliminated, start to finish, one of the many organizations responsible for narcotics and violence in a neighborhood, and I hope people there feel better about their safety."

"If we lock up the guys selling drugs on the corner, they'll be replaced that day. If we take the supply chain out, now we've caused some problems that can't be fixed overnight."

Yet the problems haven't disappeared, even in the middle of Bostic's old neighborhood. The New Breeds' former base of operations on West Van Buren has been razed, and the street was quiet on several afternoons recently. But just a few blocks away, at Wilcox and Springfield, men were lined up waiting to help customers. In fact, the pace of drug arrests in the police beat that includes Bostic's old territory has gone up since his crew was taken down.

On January 26, a 16-year-old and a 32-year-old were shot and killed near a vacant lot on the 4200 block of West Congress, a corner Bostic once controlled. Police are still investigating. In the meantime, well-wishers have created a memorial, with bunches of bright-colored balloons and a hand-painted sign that simply says, "RIP."

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