

Police say man jailed in drug case was Twin Cities kingpin

By Kevin Diaz
Staff Writer

Although they could never pin a charge on him before this week, police said Ralph (Plukey) Duke's name has been associated with drugs in the Twin Cities for nearly 20 years.

Agents of the federal Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) have pegged him "the orchestrator of one of the largest and most extensive drug operations in the state," but they said in a news release that they always found themselves unable to penetrate his organization deeply enough to incriminate him.

Instead, they set up the most extensive drug task force ever assembled in the Twin Cities to disrupt his connections and dry up his sources. Then on Wednesday, using 20 kilos of government cocaine as bait, drug agents say they got members of Duke's organization to make a \$140,000 deal with them.

"They were scrambling around looking for a safe source, and they found us," said Jim Braseth, head of the DEA office in Minneapolis.

Duke, 43, his 19-year-old son, Ralph LaMont Nunn, and four associates were arrested late Wednesday after a drug deal was set up in the parking lot of the Minneapolis Metrodome

Hilton Hotel on Industrial Blvd.

Another man was arrested Friday afternoon at Duke's guarded compound in Watertown, which has been sealed off by authorities. All the suspects are being held without bail pending a hearing Monday in federal

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court in St. Paul.

Braseth said the arrests are the culmination of a four-month investigation by 14 law enforcement agencies that involved wholesale seizures of drugs and money in Minnesota, Iowa, California and elsewhere.

The operation is expected to have a noticeable effect on the Twin Cities drug market, at least temporarily, Braseth said. "I think there's going to be a drought for a while, but there's always a vice president somewhere ready to be chairman of the board."

More than 9 kilos of cocaine were taken from a courier after a traffic stop in Iowa, \$40,000 was taken from another courier in Los Angeles, and another \$20,000 and several weapons were taken in a raid at one of Duke's residences in Minneapolis this month. About \$300,000 has been taken altogether. Authorities say they believe all those people worked for Duke.

"We were trying to disrupt their normal operations," said Braseth. He said Duke is believed to supply himself directly from a Colombian drug cartel that ferries cocaine through Mexico and into Houston. "We wanted to put pressure on them so they couldn't operate in the normal fashion," Braseth said.

Given Duke's penchant for imported cars and Las Vegas gambling vacations, authorities said, they had reason to suspect that he did more for a living than lease cars.

From informants, they said they got reports that he was capable of receiving and distributing 200 kilos of cocaine in a matter of months (a kilogram weighs 2.2 pounds). His son boasted to an undercover agent this week that Ralph Duke runs "all of the 'dope' business in Minneapolis and St. Paul," according to court documents filed in the case.

Despite Duke's reputation, police said, they had a hard time getting near him. "Since I was a street officer in 1968, I've heard his name," said Deputy Minneapolis Police Chief Doug Smith. "We've long had knowledge of his drug dealings, but because of his foreign contacts it was hard to get close to him."

Wednesday's arrests were set up with the help of an informant who posed as a Los Angeles street gang member looking for a new drug market in the Twin Cities. "They wanted him as a source, not as a competitor," Braseth said.



Ralph (Plukey) Duke

A deal allegedly was set up with the informant for Nunn to buy 10 kilos of cocaine for \$140,000. About \$118,000 was taken from Nunn and his lookouts Wednesday night when the narcotics agents sprang their trap in the hotel parking lot, police said.

Duke was not close to the deal. He was arrested several miles away, leaving his apartment in downtown Minneapolis. He was found with \$2,000 and a portable telephone. Authorities said he helped line up the cash that was to be used in the deal.

That claim is sharply disputed by his attorney, Ken Meshbesher, who said Duke was on his way to buy a pizza when he was arrested. "He's supposed to be a drug kingpin for 20 years, and when they bust him he's nowhere near the dope," Meshbesher said.

Meshbesher also questioned whether a dealer with the resources attributed to Duke would make a deal with someone he didn't know. "If he's that big, how is that possible?" he said.

Meshbesher also said he doubted a federal affidavit that said Duke had offered to mortgage his home to secure a \$100,000 personal loan for the drug transaction. "Here's a guy who's supposed to be worth millions trying to mortgage his house for \$100,000."

Authorities said they conducted 16 searches Thursday of homes and businesses associated with Duke and his family, seizing more than a pound of cocaine, several thousand dollars, several cars and weapons that included a loaded, fully automatic Uzi submachine gun.

Braseth said authorities expect to make at least 10 more arrests in the case and bring their evidence before a federal grand jury.