

## Ex-sheriff sentenced to five years for role in drug smuggling plot

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McALLEN — A federal judge sentenced Starr County's former sheriff Thursday to more than five years in prison, describing the lawman's ties to a known drug trafficker as a "stain on the badge."

Reymundo "Rey" Guerra pleaded guilty to one count of drug trafficking conspiracy in May. The 52-year-old lawman — who resigned his post after his arrest — admitted to leaking sensitive law enforcement intelligence and bungling his own department's investigations in exchange for cash payments from one of Miguel Alemán's top narcotics smugglers.

"For really pennies — nickels — you were influenced by these people," U.S. District Judge Randy Crane said Thursday.

Guerra's 64-month sentence falls below the eight to 10 years recommended under federal sentencing guidelines, but Crane justified the departure by noting the minor role the sheriff played in the overall drug trafficking network and his willingness to aid federal investigators after his arrest.

But as prosecutors alleged Thursday, Guerra released information that could have endangered the lives of his deputies' confidential informants had the FBI not been monitoring his activities from behind the scenes.

"I apologize to my family, my friends and my constituents for this wrong that I have done," he said. "To the men and women who wear the badge, I'm sorry I let them down."

Federal agents first became involved after one of Guerra's own deputies began to question his behavior.

The investigator became suspicious after the sheriff asked him to divulge sensitive information about an October 2005 stash house raid in Roma.

During a meeting the deputy had with Guerra and another man, the sheriff ordered the investigator to tell the man — whom the deputy suspected of being a drug trafficker — whether any paperwork was found in the home that might link the drugs to someone.

"It would be very unusual for my boss to ask me to reveal such information to someone such as Hinojosa," FBI agent Katherine Gutierrez testified Thursday, referring to Jose Carlos Hinojosa — the suspected drug trafficker who was in the truck that day.

The deputy provided his boss a fake name ostensibly found on paperwork in the home and found out days later that his suspicions had been warranted.

Hinojosa was heavily involved in drug trafficking and worked for one of the founding members of the Zetas. A former Miguel Alemán police officer, he has pleaded guilty to one count each of drug smuggling and money laundering conspiracy and is currently awaiting

sentencing.

The fake name resurfaced on a forged lease agreement Guerra helped draft to close the investigation into the stash house. If the homeowner — who was working for Hinojosa — could say that he leased the house to someone else living in Mexico, deputies would be unable to track down a suspect and close the case.

The sheriff employed a similar strategy two years later after a separate June 2007 stash house raid.

From time to time, Hinojosa gave Guerra gifts in the form of \$3,000-\$5,000 payments or deliveries of steaks and shrimp, but the sheriff's defense attorney Philip Hilder argued Thursday that his client might have been misunderstood those to be campaign contributions rather than bribes.

"It's unfortunate that the sheriff threw away his career for a very slight amount of money," he said.

Guerra's arrest in October came a week after he and 27 others were named in a 19-count federal indictment targeting Hinojosa's drug smuggling organization.

Each person arrested in the case has pleaded guilty to various crimes ranging from drug smuggling to money laundering. Nine others besides Guerra were also sentenced Thursday.

Some — like Raymundo Gonzalez, who coordinated drug loads between Hinojosa and several of his co-conspirators — had long worked in the trade. He received a near 20-year sentence.

Others, like Guerra, seemed almost to have fallen into the drug world despite active roles in their community.

Sharletha Woodard — a 31-year-old Houston elementary school teacher and member of her church choir — told the court Thursday that she had been enticed by her boyfriend to begin mailing packages of cocaine to Delaware in August 2007. After starting a new school year Monday, she pleaded with the judge for leniency.

"I've hurt a lot of people — most importantly the students," she said. "I've made a mistake and I'm truly aware of that."

Crane sentenced her to just less than four years in prison but not before responding:

"One of the lessons in all of this is no one is above the law."

The judge granted Guerra a month to turn himself in to the federal Bureau of Prisons. He is set to begin his sentence Sept. 28.