

CRIME NOVEMBER 21, 2015

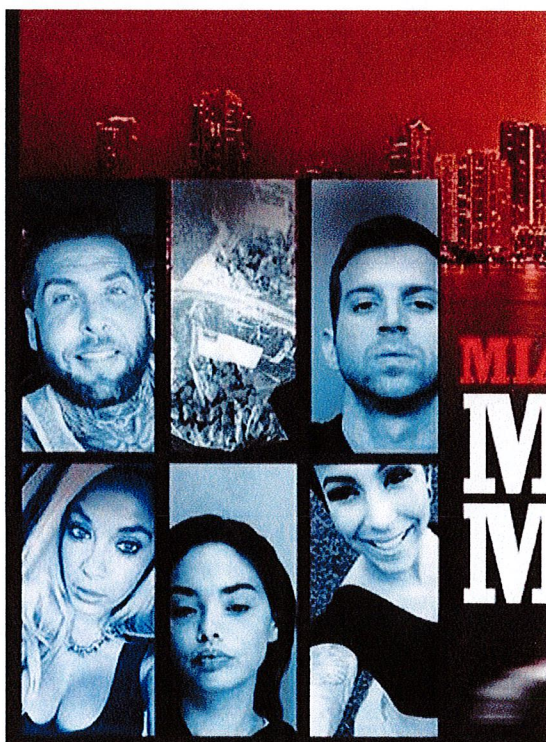
Brothers in arms and drugs: Miami Molly ring faces trial

HIGHLIGHTS

Buddies, both with military backgrounds, ran import operation

Spat with porn star helped bring ring down

One already convicted; 11 others face federal charges



< 1 of 13 >

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The investigation that cracked open one of the largest synthetic drug rings in Miami history began with an angry naked porn star jumping on her boyfriend's white Porsche.

The police call to that lovers spat would eventually lift the lid on a cast of characters straight out of a Hollywood buddy movie. In the leading roles: Matthew Anich and Jorge Ramon Hernandez, two guys who boasted seemingly straight-arrow backgrounds of college degrees and military experience but also shared a taste for Miami's flashy club culture.



Miami

They pumped iron, co-owned a tattoo shop, drove fancy cars and chased an array of party girls — all while, prosecutors say, secretly importing club drugs from shady Chinese labs and enlisting a crew of well-placed associates: Sexual conquests wired money overseas and picked up shipments; strippers and at least one DJ peddled pills that brought in millions of dollars.

INTERACTIVE
MAP: BUSTING A
MIAMI MOLLY
RING

“It’s like a film that can only happen in Miami,” said Edward J. O’Donnell IV, who is representing one defendant in the

case. “It’s like a cross between *Pain and Gain*, *Wild Things* and *Bachelor Party*.”

Details of this previously unpublicized case are now unfolding in Miami federal court. In September, a grand jury indicted Hernandez and 10 others on drug-trafficking charges. The trial is set to begin at month’s end, but will likely be pushed back to next year.

Anich, who would betray Hernandez by helping federal agents take him down, has already pleaded guilty and been sentenced to nearly five years in prison, though he is not scheduled to surrender until January. All the others, except one who remains a fugitive, have formally contested the charges but plea deals seem likely in most of the cases.

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attorney Edward J. O'Donnell IV

Together, the group is believed to have imported hundreds of kilos of methyloone and ethylone, euphoric synthetic drugs marketed as Molly among South Florida clubgoers. Retail profits could run as high as \$30,000 to \$40,000 a kilo.

The suspects typify a new breed of South Florida drug dealers, mostly middle- to upper-class people who use the Internet to buy cheaply made synthetic drugs from overseas through the mail, an illegal trade recently chronicled in the Miami Herald series Pipeline China.

According to court documents, law-enforcement records and interviews, the two ringleaders drifted into dealing after injuries derailed their once-promising military careers.

TAKEDOWN



Anich, 30, grew up in Virginia, the son of a U.S. Marine officer. He was bright enough to win a scholarship to Tulane University in New Orleans and earn a degree in cellular and

molecular biology in 2007. After struggling to find a job in the field during an economic recession, he followed his father's path and joined the Marines. But during officer training, Anich fractured his hip, abruptly ending his military career.

Anich moved to Miami to search for work. Instead, court records show, he found trouble. He became addicted to painkillers and spent much of his time in clubs and gyms.

He soon became fast friends with Hernandez, 37, a fellow vet turned fitness instructor who had returned to his hometown and pursued a similar lifestyle.

Hernandez, a Cuban-American, graduated from the University of Miami with a degree in political science in 2001. He joined the Army after the terrorist attacks on the United States. "He was completely motivated by 9-11," said his defense lawyer, Ken Swartz. "He's a person that left a comfortable life with a college degree and went to a different world to fight the war on terrorism."

Like his friend, Hernandez was also brainy. He was tapped to attend a military linguist school, where he learned to speak fluent Arabic. He went on to join an intelligence unit during combat tours in Iraq and Afghanistan.

But after seven years, his military career also was cut short by injury: two fractured discs suffered while rappelling down from a helicopter in Afghanistan. Hernandez came home.

"He went from a world where he faced death every day and returned to Miami — and all of its temptations," said Swartz, who would not discuss the criminal charges against his client.

Hernandez was a good-looking guy, blond, blue-eyed and ripped, but back in Miami tattoos grew to cover his entire torso, including a winged skull tattooed on his throat. Images on his Instagram account showed an almost

clichéd Miami lifestyle — leading group exercise classes, partying at nightclubs, cheering at Dolphins' games.

The affable and outgoing Hernandez posted selfie after selfie, some images with a gorgeous girlfriend, another posing with a wad of hundred-dollar bills. "Jobs are for poor people," he wrote in one post of him at a pool.

Jorge "frequents strip clubs and is very flashy," one Miami DJ, who was introduced into the Molly game through Hernandez, told federal agents. Hernandez also drove a Bentley — paid for with \$100,000 cash — and lived in various waterfront condos.

Anich and Hernandez opened the tattoo shop FTL Ink in Fort Lauderdale, but court documents and investigators say the real money came in from an illicit side business. From November 2011 to September 2012, Anich was ordering between two and five kilos of methylene a week, as well as steroids, according to documents.

One of his suppliers was the chemical lab Kai Kai Technology in Nanjing, China. A contact there named only as Alice assured him that EMS or UPS would deliver the product directly to his door within three to five days — with a label suggesting they were actually legal chemicals.

The two men were shrewd, investigators say, usually tapping others to do the direct dealing or money exchanges. They say Hernandez would employ a string of sex partners from his many romantic conquests to wire money to China, and accept and pick up packages from overseas.

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Anich, investigators say, enlisted strippers to sell Molly capsules to customers at their clubs, where the two men would sometimes drop tens of thousands of dollars for fun.

Investigators say Hernandez also provided Molly to Li Valdes, a resident DJ known as “DJ Chino” at the popular Club Space in downtown Miami. He distributed the pills within the club; Valdes is now doing federal prison time for Molly dealing.

For Hernandez and Anich, business was booming, pulling in millions. The ring also remained mostly under the radar of law enforcement until the fateful night of Sept. 19, 2012, when a porn star became perturbed.

One of Hernandez’s former girlfriends, a Hooters waitress named Ashley Sue Garcia who police say was one of his drug runners, had introduced Anich to Blanca Cabrera Diaz, an actress who performed in porn films under the name Selena Rose.

Anich and Diaz hit it off. But their relationship would eventually blow up inside Anich’s Porsche Cayman in Miami’s Shenandoah neighborhood. Witnesses saw her punch and kick Anich, whose name she had tattooed on her ankle, then jump naked atop the car.

After Miami police charged her with domestic battery and possession of cocaine, she took a parting shot at Anich, telling detectives about the packages of white and brown powder arriving in the mail. Diaz’s own case was later dropped after she finished a program for first-time offenders and she was not charged in the federal case.

But for Anich, there would be no beating a serious drug rap. At his Brickell apartment, detectives seized Molly, pill presses, guns, a ledger, a laptop, jewelry, more than \$100,000 in cash and a stripper pole. He was first arrested on state drug-trafficking charges.

Over the last few years, his state case quietly lingered in the court system as state and federal investigators worked together to build

cases against Hernandez and a host of other associates. It was not until January that federal agents arrested Anich and soon flipped him for a bigger investigation, getting him to agree to record conversations with his still unaware partner.

By March, their conversations showed that Hernandez had become paranoid of police, moving out of his South Beach condo and into his girlfriend's apartment. He sold his Bentley. He complained to Anich about the lack of shipments from China — and a moody girlfriend, Carleane Berman. She also was indicted on charges of conspiracy to import drugs but has pleaded not guilty.

“She’s like, ‘You’ve been acting different the last month.’ I’m like, ‘Carly, you need to understand like, my best friend got picked up, he got picked up by the f----- feds,’ ” he complained to Anich in a recorded conversation. “My other homeboy I used to do business with has been locked up for four months now. I don’t have s--- coming in. I’m in a bad f----- place.”

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Jorge Ramon Hernandez

Anich claimed he had made new connections with Chinese chemical labs. “There’s a ton of suppliers out there,” he said, according to the recording obtained by the Herald.

In May, Anich coaxed Hernandez into striking a deal. Hernandez agreed to wire money to Anich’s Chinese supplier. Agents intercepted the package sent to the home of a Boynton Beach woman, according to the criminal complaint by Homeland Security Investigations agent Alexis Gregory.

On June 8, as Anich and Hernandez walked out of the LA Fitness at South Miami's Sunset Place, a fleet of SUVs suddenly pulled up. In broad daylight, heavily armed Homeland Security agents popped out and surrounded the pair.

"He certainly wasn't expecting that," defense lawyer Swartz said.

Hernandez surrendered immediately. But the evidence against him was strong. Confronted by Homeland Security agents, court records show, he also immediately agreed to cooperate within hours.

Within days, Hernandez — accompanied by an undercover agent posing as one of his boys — began making Molly deals to incriminate a slew of associates in the ring. Records show many of the deals were captured on undercover video surveillance and recorded phone calls.

Among those indicted in September:

- Josue Morales, 33, an ex-con who met Hernandez at nightclubs such as Nikki Beach and Space. Investigators believe he introduced Hernandez into the Molly game. He ran a North Miami tax preparation business, where his Molly packages arrived, according to reports. He is now a fugitive.

At one point, he married Garcia, Hernandez's one-time girlfriend. Garcia, 26, is a model and manager at Swine restaurant in Coral Gables, where she was arrested.

- Mario Melton, 30, graduated from Florida State University and obtained a master's in business from St. Thomas University before enrolling in its law school this year, a pursuit that was interrupted by his arrest in October. Melton came onto federal agents' radar in May 2014, when they intercepted a package of Molly from China at his grandfather's company, Transfreight International Freight Services.

Melton is the son of Eston “Dusty” Melton, a former Miami Herald reporter and prominent Miami-Dade County lobbyist.

Investigators believe Mario Melton and Hernandez shipped Molly packages to the warehouse. Melton’s defense attorney, Michael Rosen, issued a statement on Friday, disputing the case against his client: “We are strongly convinced that Mario is innocent of these charges, and we are confident that the federal judicial system will reach the same conclusion.”

▪ Seth Daniel Murray, 28, the son of two Miami-Dade corrections officers. Federal agents intercepted a package of ethylone from China in a deal they say was set up through Hernandez. Murray’s alleged runner, a woman nicknamed Cupcake, turned on him — and delivered the parcel to him in a roadside meeting in June, court records show.

Agents immediately arrested Murray, who was found with a pistol in his car. He has pleaded not guilty.

So far, only Anich has been convicted. He was sentenced to four years, eight months in prison after his defense attorney, Joaquin Perez, sought leniency at his hearing in August. Anich will not surrender until Jan. 8 — and a federal judge could shave even more time off his sentence because of his extensive cooperation over the past three years.

At his sentencing before U.S. Judge Cecilia Altonaga, Anich said he was ashamed of his behavior and of the pain he had put his family through.

His father, Bruce Anich, a retired U.S. Marine of 20 years whose footsteps his son had once hoped to follow, told the judge that the arrest had made him question whether he had failed as a parent. But he also said his son’s decision to admit to his crimes and help bring down his former drug ring was the right thing to do.

“I realized that he took responsibility for his actions,” the elder Anich said. “I am not proud of what he did, but I am proud of how he acted through these last three years.”

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