TEXAS HEROIN MASSACRE

IN 1996, DR. LARRY ALEXANDER, an earnest young medic with sandy hair and a stylish goatee, came back to Plano, Texas, after a residency at an inner-city hospital in Kansas City that had left him reeling. He had seen enough murder there, enough coke, crack and crank to last a lifetime. Plano, by contrast, was a wealthy corporate nesting ground north of Dallas – good schools, big houses, smoked-glass business parks and a hundred lighted ball fields – and, statistically, the safest city in Texas. It had fewer murders in a year than Kansas City had on any given Saturday night.

This smooth exterior, however, concealed a certain hollowness. Plano is a pop-up city, having risen from empty range land in less than a generation. During the last couple of decades, some 200,000 people have moved there to work for corporate giants like 7Up, JCPenney and Frito-Lay. In the wide-open land to the west of the new freeway, developers built a sea of gated communities and subdivisions that have been described as "tract mansions."

The city went through a bad patch in the early Eighties, when seven teenagers committed suicide and a dozen others attempted it in a one-year period. The national press blamed Plano's status as a sterile corporate dormitory where children had too much money and too little attention. And while Plano's 200,000 citizens are the same decent, well-meaning folks you'd find anywhere in Middle America, they hardly know one another. Once again, Plano was about to pay a terrible price for its splendid isolation, and one of the first to spot the impending danger was Larry Alexander.

ER physicians like Alexander belong to a fairly exclusive club, and they tend to compare notes from one hospital to the next. In the fall of 1996, friends at Parkland Health and Hospital in Dallas, and at Methodist and Baylor, were telling him that heroin was back in style. His first reaction was that this was a Dallas problem; Plano had nothing to worry about. Then on New Year's Day 1997, he found himself looking at the body of Adam Wade Goforth, a nineteen-year-old Marine who had come home for the holidays only to die of a heroin overdose.

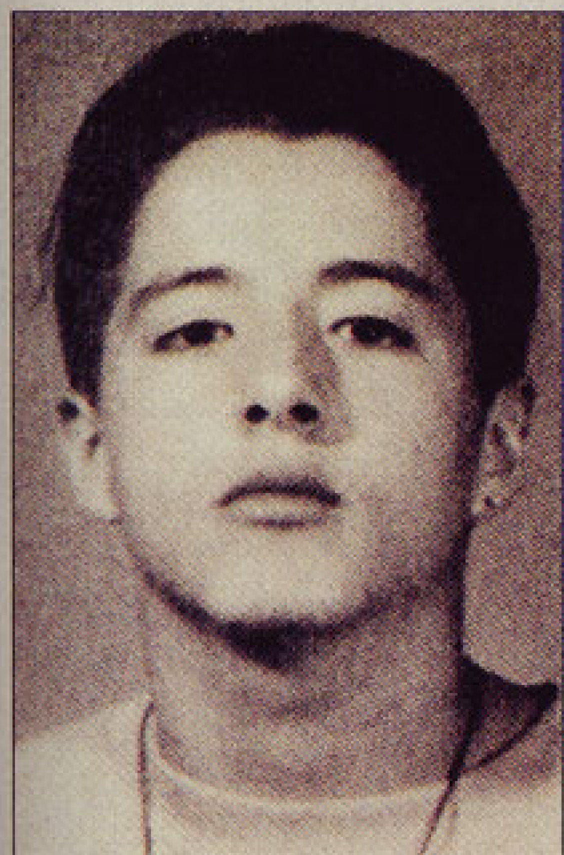
During the next few weeks, Alexander saw a parade of overdose victims rushed into his emergency room, usually dropped off by terrified friends. "They're banging on the door, screaming, 'He's not breathing!' " Alexander says. "We drag the kid out of the back of a Suburban. He's blue. We put him on a gurney and run him back into the ER. The next thing I hear is tires peeling out. His friends take off, and we don't even know who he is." Less than a month after Goforth died, Alexander's ER team lost another teen; and six weeks after that, Victor Garcia, a middle-school soccer player who was barely fifteen, was found face down in a church parking lot. His friends had left him there after driving around with his dead body for a day and a half.

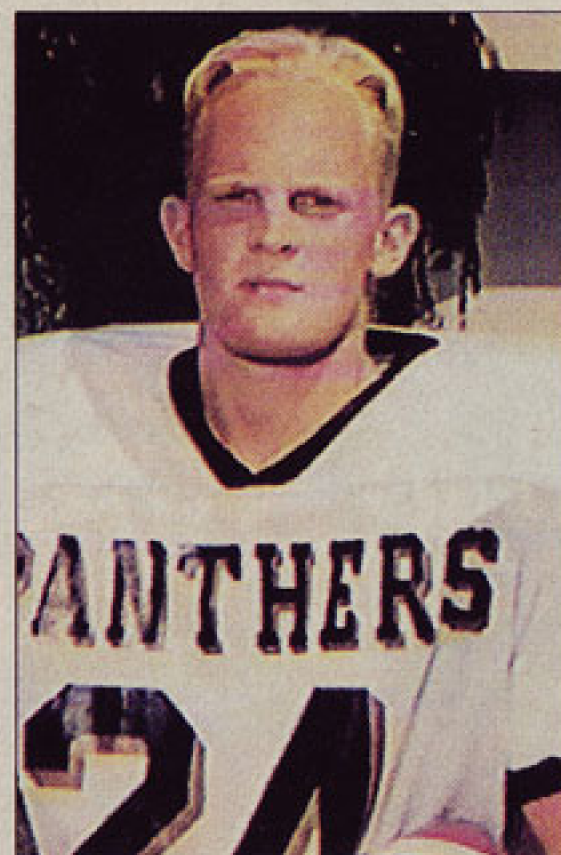
By now it was clear that something was deeply wrong in Plano. Alexander checked with his contacts in the Dallas police department and they said that cheap black-tar heroin was flooding into the area from Mexico. What distinguished this stuff from anything they had seen before was its astonishing quality. The product on the street was five times more potent than the heroin that authorities were accustomed to seeing. Because it was so powerful, you didn't have to shoot it. You could just snort the powder.

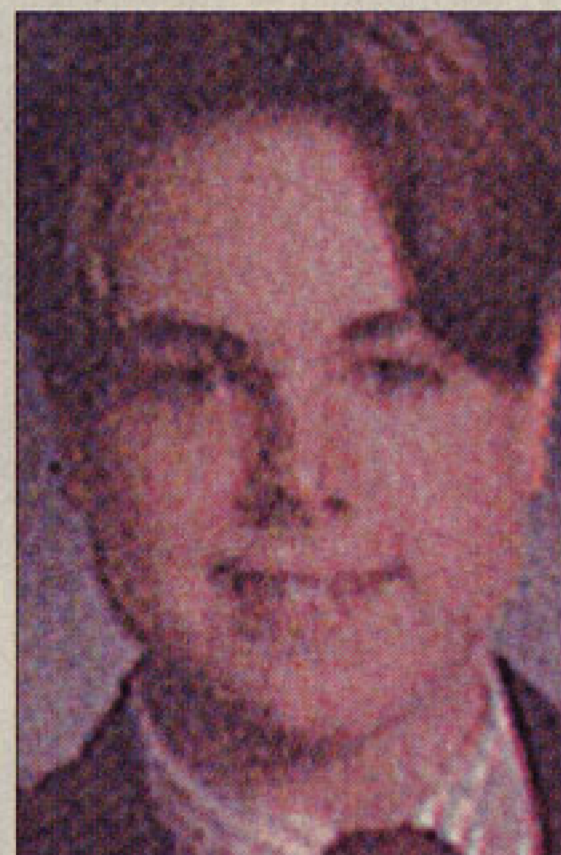
Soon, Alexander was handling three or four overdoses a night. He knew he had to get the word out about what was quickly becoming an epidemic, but his superiors suggested he keep quiet. In the next few months, he cornered one official after another and kept getting the same nervous response. "People don't want the community to be known as

AFTER JOANNE AND GEORGE MALINA lost their son Milan, they discovered that authorities had kept the public in the dark about Plano's heroin epidemic.

THE JOCKS AND PREPS OF PLANO, TEXAS, COULDN'T GET ENOUGH OF A NEW DRUG. BY THE TIME THEY FOUND OUT WHAT THE FINE BROWN POWDER REALLY WAS, KIDS HAD ALREADY STARTED DYING. BY MIKE GRAY







having a drug problem," says Alexander. "The city council, the police department, big business, whatever. They don't want to talk about it." In three years, eighteen teenagers from Plano and its suburbs would die of heroin overdoses. In 1997 alone, another 75 to 100 would be brought back from the brink of death by Alexander and his colleagues.

THE RÍO DE LAS BALSAS, a wild mountain stream for most of its 500-mile tumble to the Pacific, divides the Mexican states of Michoacán and Guerrero, and somewhere up this river, in the jungle between the coast and the provincial capital of Ciudad Altamirano, is a tiny collection of adobe huts known as Pinzandaro. Watched over by the 12,000-foot peaks of the Sierra Madre del Sur, the village is distinguished by its moderate climate and its crushing poverty.

One day in 1994, Irma Lopez Vega, a diminutive nineteen-year-old mestiza, decided she'd had enough. Ever since she quit school in the third grade to help feed her siblings, she had been working like a dog – cleaning other people's houses, putting in a full shift at the flour mill, selling enchiladas on the side – and all she had to show for it was the food on her table. Her husband, Ecliserio Martinez Garcia, a respected figure in the community, had grander dreams for his family, and when he decided to make the 800-mile trek north to the U.S. border, Irma was with him.

They crossed the Rio Grande at Laredo, Texas, that summer and made their way to McKinney, about thirty miles north of Dallas and fifteen miles from Plano. Once there, they moved in with

SEVEN OF THE EIGHTEEN YOUNG HEROIN VICTIMS FROM PLANO: Milan Malina's father, George, gave ROLLING STONE this photograph of Milan's corpse because, he says, "people are so insulated from the reality of death." The other victims (from left): Victor Garcia, 15; Tacha Campbell, 17; Rob Hill, 18; Erin Baker, 16; Wes Scott, 19; Jay Aguanno, 19.

friends from home, Salvador Pineda Contreras and his wife, Marcruz. Salvador had a wood-frame bungalow on Walnut Street, within hailing distance of the Southern Pacific railroad. Once again, Irma Lopez was working like a slave, but now she was getting paid for it. The two women held down jobs at a local dry cleaner while helping their husbands build a business steam-cleaning the driveways and patios of the gringos. But they were sending every spare nickel back home, and it was a struggle.

When Ecliserio Martinez Garcia first laid eyes on Plano, he must have thought he was looking at El Dorado. The median household income, $54,000, beat the U.S. national figure by eighty percent, and the kids all drove sport utility vehicles. It was an upscale market for everything from Jaguars to Learjets, but somehow nobody had thought to supply the place with high-quality heroin. Drugs, of course, were already on the scene, but you had to go all the way to Dallas, into unsavory neighborhoods. As one ghetto dealer puts it, "These white kids, they're scared to come to my neighborhood, so they come and buy double and triple what my people buy." Martinez was in a position to solve that problem.

The village of Pinzandaro may have its drawbacks, but its climate is perfect for growing opium poppies. Of the sixty tons of heroin that Mexico produces each year, at least half comes from these mountains above Acapulco.

The setup was simple. In these high mountain valleys, the poppies grow like weeds. Using friends and family, Martinez processed the local crop into high-grade black-tar heroin, shipped it north to the border at Laredo and hired couriers to mule the product into the U.S. a few ounces at a time. Once it got to McKinney, the heroin was ground into powder with an electric coffee mill, then cut with Dormin, an over-the-counter sleep aid, and packaged in gel caps. It was nerve-racking and desperate work, but for men like Ecliserio, accustomed to backbreaking jobs and the routine dangers of life in Mexico, this was nothing.

Late in 1996, Ecliserio delivered his first batch to his Plano contacts, four young Mexican-Americans who had lived in the area all their lives and had established a modest business selling cocaine to Plano teenagers. The three Meza brothers, all in their early twenties, and their sidekick, Santiago Mejia, 17, had known one another since childhood. They started offering free samples of the new stuff to their regular customers from the Plano high schools, and all of a sudden, demand went through the roof.

The purity, even after the heroin was cut, was an astonishing thirty-five percent – so powerful, there was no need to search for a vein, or a spike, or a men's room, or a belt to tie off with. What's more, Dormin contains antihistamines, so it eliminated the telltale signs of heroin use: red eyes and a runny nose. As for terms, they were pretty good: ten bucks a cap and the first one's free.

The Meza brothers operated out of "the Blue House," a saltbox at 1120 Avenue I, where a couple of the brothers usually lived full time. It was in the old part of Plano, east of the freeway. By late 1996, the scene at the Blue House was off the scale. "They were parked three deep all hours of the day and night," says a neighbor, who remembers kids in Beemers and Jeeps dashing in and out with their engines running.

The stuff was called chiva, and the kids thought it was just the next drug in line – marijuana, LSD, ecstasy . . . chiva. But this shit was fantastic. "Heroin is about as mellow as you can get," says one Plano college student who's been dealing since the eighth grade. "Nice vibrations, you have your eyes roll back for a couple hours, and at these wholesale prices, you can afford to do as much as you want."

The party scene in Plano took an exciting and sinister turn. You would get a beep on your pager, summoning you to somebody's house where the parents weren't around, or maybe to a motel room, and there you'd find football players, cheerleaders, geeks and honor-roll students all doing chiva. The crowd was not the expected stoners and rebels. These were the students you were supposed to emulate. And they clearly had no idea what they were into. Collin County drug counselor Sabina Stern was stunned.

"I would say, 'Have you ever used chiva?' " she says.

" 'Well, yeah.'

" 'Have you ever used heroin?'

" 'Oh, I'd never touch heroin.'

"They didn't know the difference. And I don't think it was a deliberate attempt to fool kids on the part of the Mexicans. *Chiva* is just the Mexican word for heroin."

There was also a certain glamour attached to being on the inside. You'd see hand signals at a party and a bunch of kids would disappear into the back bedroom, or a car would pull up in the driveway and your boyfriend would duck out with part of the football squad and come back with a whole different attitude.

Chris Cooper, a gentle, easygoing twenty-year-old African-American with a quick smile, recalls those days. "It was not peer pressure," he says, "but it was just, my friends had moved on to it, and I was kinda wondering, what did it feel like? I had five or ten close friends. We'd go clubbin' in downtown Dallas, Fort Worth, anywhere there's a party." But very shortly, weekends degenerated into finding a place that you didn't have to move from.

"I can remember doing it with a friend," says Cooper, "and he was telling me, 'Man, I heard if you do it seven days in a row, you start feeling bad.' And I was like, 'Hey, I've been doing it about eight or nine days in a row.' So I didn't do it for a day and I was like, 'Yeah, what is this? This is kinda weird.' And then I did some, and right when I did it, I was feeling like crap and then *whoo!*"

That was Chris Cooper's first clue that maybe he was in over his head. His mother, a TV newswoman, had moved to Plano, she says, "because it was safe." Chris had been using for several weeks before he began to get nervous about it, and by the time it dawned on him and everybody else that they were dealing with a major addiction, it was too late. Dozens of kids were deeply involved, and some who had started as users were about to become dealers.

John Aaron Pruett, 18, was one of the first serious users to get busted. Initially his parents were supportive, and they got him into rehab. But when he relapsed, they were told that tough love was the answer. So they cut off his income, which cured his cash surplus but not his addiction. Pruett, slight and dark-haired, started dealing. He'd buy the chiva uncut from the Mezas and mix it with the Dormin himself. His apartment, on Preston Road, a couple of minutes from the Plano senior high schools, became a major branch of the Blue House.

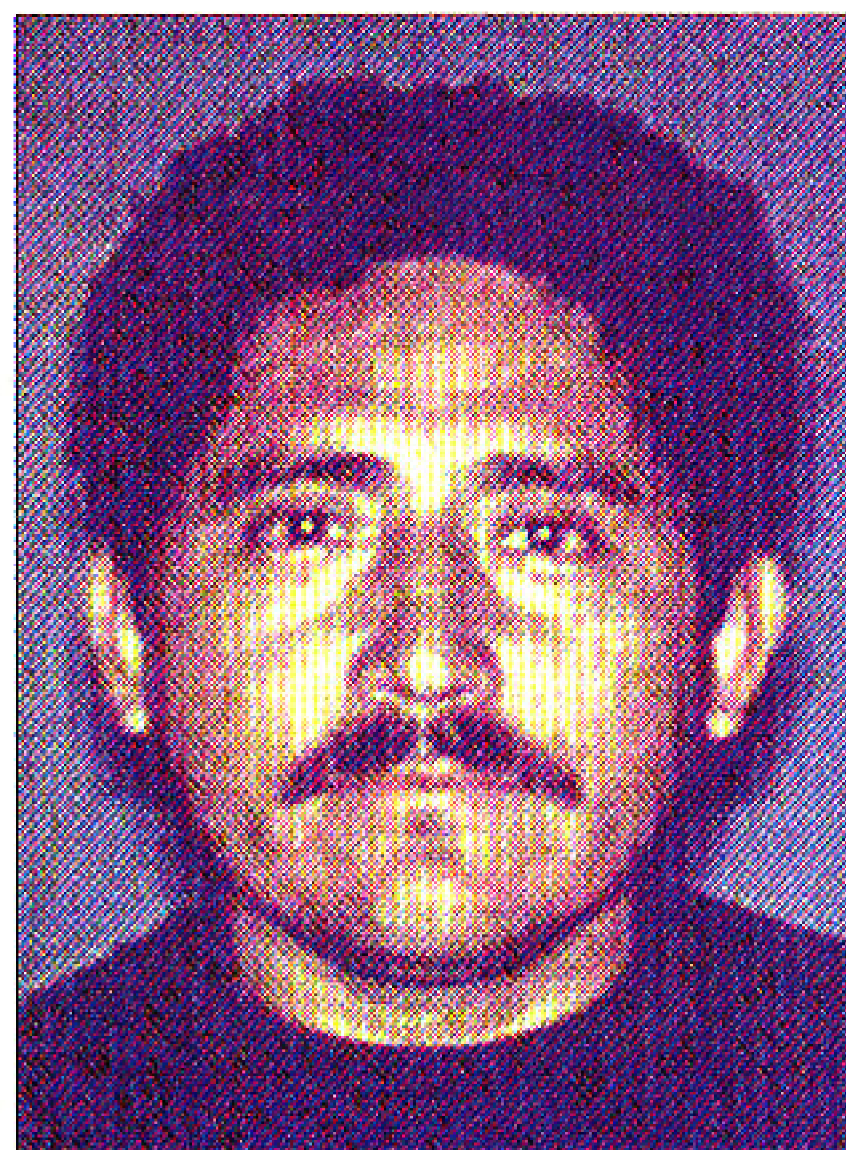
Emily Stevenson, a cute, long-haired former cheerleader and an honor student, got into chiva like you get into ice cream. "I did it and I liked it and kept on doing it," she says. She became such a fixture at the Blue House that they invited her into the business. She and Santiago Mejia became best friends, and Emily wound up handling the books for him. She also provided the wheels for the resupply runs to McKinney until her parents took her car away. Later, when Santiago needed a place to lay low, she stashed him in her bedroom closet.

In spite of the growing awareness about the downside of this new craze, there were still plenty of people willing to try chiva. For one thing, not everyone who used it got addicted. According to the U.S. Department of Health, most people who try heroin do not become addicted. And when the kids in Plano saw that some of their friends were able to take it or leave it, they decided that chiva couldn't be all that dangerous.

The kids who did get hooked, however, were in for a jolt. Milan Malina, 19, was a sensitive-artist-and-poet type. His mother, Joanne, had raised him on opera. "I used to play Pavarotti while he was still in the crib," she says. The family was extremely close. His father, George, suffered a heart attack some months earlier and Milan had said, "If you die, I don't want to go on living."

Likable and outgoing, Milan made friends easily. He had some problems with school, though, and dropped out in his senior year. But he finished his GED, and in January '97 he was checking out the University of California at Santa Barbara campus when he was busted for driving while intoxicated. He spent three days in jail before his girlfriend was able to bail him out. In the fallout from this brush with the law, he confessed to his parents what they had already suspected: that he was in trouble with drugs and desperate to quit. They made a few quick phone calls and found Dr. John Talmadge, a psychiatrist and addiction expert at the University of North Texas.

Right from the start, Talmadge was encouraged. "Milan was poised, intelligent, very natural," says Talmadge. "He looked like the cover of *GQ* – kind of a young Al Pacino. I was expecting somebody tough or street-wise. He struck me as almost innocent." Talmadge's evalu-



DRUG SELLER Ecliserio Martinez Garcia will get twenty years to life. His wife, Irma, who worked at a dry cleaner, faces a state trial. The Plano kids all plea-bargained.

MIKE GRAY *is the author of "Drug Crazy" (Random House). His last feature for* ROLLING STONE *was "What Really Happened at Three Mile Island" (RS 291).*

ation was glowing. "We have an acronym, YAVIS: young, attractive, verbal, insightful and successful. If somebody has all five, they have a good prognosis. Milan had an excellent chance."

Talmadge felt that Milan was so motivated that outpatient therapy alone would do the trick. Events proved Talmadge right. When Milan celebrated his twentieth birthday, at the beginning of June, he had been clean for four months. He was enrolled in the local junior college, scheduled to start classes the following Monday. His parents were beaming. But there was an ominous note in the otherwise upbeat celebration. When he spoke to a friend in California that night, he told her, "My friends here don't like me anymore. They like the high Milan. They don't like the clean Milan."

That Saturday night, he decided to give his friends a treat: the high Milan. A bunch of the guys were getting together to watch a hockey game at a house on a golf course where one of the boys lived with his father. With Dad gone for the weekend and the maid in another part of the house, they passed around joints and champagne. Chris Cooper was there. He and Milan had been friends since freshman gym class. When the discussion got around to chiva, everybody was in. Chris and Milan made the drug run together.

Along with his friends, Milan snorted a couple of caps of chiva. By the end of the evening, he couldn't stay on his feet. His pals put him to bed and told him to sleep it off. When Chris decided to call it a night, Milan seemed safely asleep. Chris didn't think twice about him – people passed out all the time.

Any junkie will tell you not to sit around drinking while you're waiting to score. Alcohol and heroin don't mix. They are both downers, and they reinforce each other, shutting off the part of the brain that reminds you to breathe. But the alcohol wasn't Milan's only problem. He was also seriously asthmatic, and though he had been told since he was a small boy not to take certain cold medications containing antihistamines – which dry out the lungs and can trigger asthma attacks – he probably did not realize that the chiva he was snorting was full of antihistamines. On top of this, he had been clean for several months, so he had the low tolerance of a first-time user. "They said he was snoring throughout the night," recalls his dad. "The reality is, he was aspirating his vomit."

A few hours after Chris had gone home, he got an urgent phone call: Milan was in the hospital. Chris threw on some clothes and got there as fast as he could. In the waiting room, seven of his buddies were standing around in shock. A police officer was interviewing them. Then Milan's parents came out of the emergency room.

George Malina found a chaplain in the waiting room. He asked the priest to escort Milan's friends in to see the body. He wanted them to have a chance to say goodbye. And he wanted them to grasp the enormity of what had happened.

The chaplain led them in and pulled back the sheet. There was Milan's face – blue, caked with blood, eyes closed for all time. Some reacted in stunned silence; the rest were sobbing. "They wanted us to see what had happened, to really look at him," says Cooper. He looks away. "It was awful."

"MY FRIENDS HERE don't like me anymore. They like the high Milan. They don't like the clean Milan."

GEORGE MALINA wanted to find out who was responsible, and he wanted to make sure none of these other kids ended up like Milan. He went to the police and demanded an investigation. The police said there was nothing to investigate. They said that Milan had brought this on himself; yes, he was a victim, but he was also a perpetrator. Case closed. "They were very condescending to us," says Joanne Malina. "They made us feel like we as the parents were at fault, that we were the cause of his death."

The determination to keep a lid on this story – spurred, no doubt, by an honest concern for property values – extended to neighboring suburbs like Richardson and Addison, as well. But Plano authorities were particularly jumpy. For years, whenever city officials showed up at conventions, it was, "Oh, Plano, the suicide capital." It had taken a decade to bury that smear. As the police chief said later, "There's no way you can package nine, ten, twelve deaths in something that is going to be positive."

But George Malina was willing to let it be known that his son had died of a heroin overdose if that could save some other kid. And when he found out that Larry Alexander had said the same thing months earlier – and was stonewalled – Malina was outraged. "Whatever guilt the parents have to carry," he says, "they carry. But shouldn't the authorities have the responsibility to give us an alert?"

By then, however, it was academic. A reporter for the *Plano Star-Courier* had pieced the story together from the obituaries. She tracked down Alexander at work, and he gave up the whole story – the extent of heroin use, the deaths, the town's denial in the wake of the disaster. The article ran right after Milan's death, and within hours the *Dallas Morning News* was on the case. Before long, Diane Sawyer was on the line.

Finally unleashed, Alexander began lecturing to students all over town, trying to educate them about heroin – but for a lot of them, it was already too late. The overdoses and the deaths continued. In November 1997, sixteen-year-old Erin Baker, a Plano Senior High junior, became victim number thirteen. The authorities were mystified. The bodies piling up seemed to have no impact on the users. Kids would sometimes attend a friend's funeral and, after sobbing at a graveside, immediately go out and score. "I don't think people who don't use understand how addictive heroin is," says Sarah, 18. "I went to one funeral and got high right afterward. I felt bad, but I was just numb." Another addict agrees: "I've taken friends to the hospital and then gone right back to where we were and kept on using."

Chris Cooper knows what they're talking about. "I had three or four pretty good friends die," he says. "It didn't stop me." But after that scene with Milan in the ER, he quit using and was clean for nearly two months – just sheer willpower. One day, however, he decided to try one little cap, and in no time he was right back where he'd started. Finally he told his mom he needed help.

Chris was lucky. Decent long-term treatment usually costs a fortune, and the health insurance that most of us have will get you a ten-day detox at the most. But Chris' mom was able to find him a safe haven an hour southeast of Dallas, at the House of Isaiah, a private treatment center run by former L.A. Rams linebacker Isaiah Robertson. Modeled after Alcoholics Anonymous, the twelve-step program relies on spiritual guidance for its forty or so clients.

After he completed the six-month course, Chris decided to spend another year at the center's halfway house, in Fort Worth. Living there, he got a job working construction and cut himself off from his old life in Plano. "I thought, 'Man, I'm doing good now,' " he says. But while Chris was getting his life back together in the city, events in Plano were moving along another set of rails.

The night Milan died, Chris had been interviewed by the cops, but nothing ever came of it, and he managed to convince himself he was in the clear. But just after five on the morning of July 22nd, 1998, Chris was getting ready for work when he got a frantic call from his mother: FBI agents were outside her front door.

Within a few hours he was in front of a federal judge. The charge was something he'd never even heard of: conspiracy to distribute heroin that caused a death. Thirty minutes later he was in a cell – "the lowest, the scariest point in my life," Chris says. When his lawyer showed up, he learned that he faced a mandatory minimum sentence of twenty years.

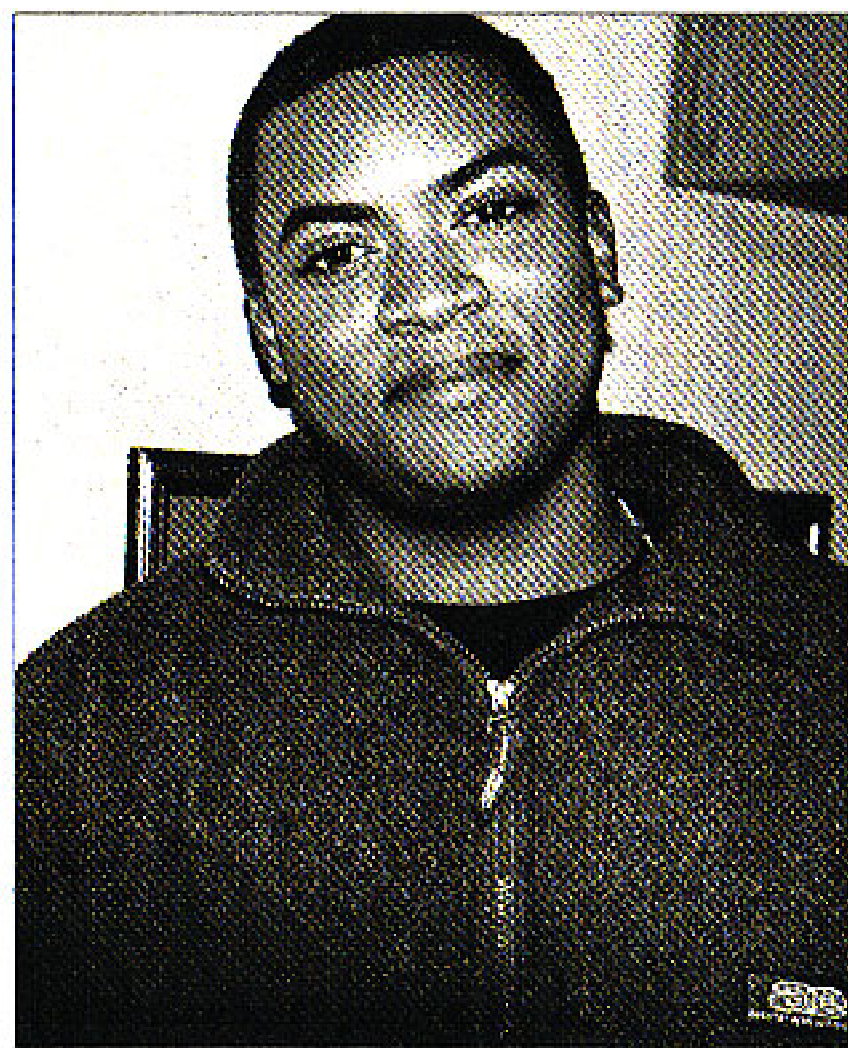
"When I heard those words," he says, "I remember thinking, 'You fucked up, you really did it this time.' It's hard to describe that feeling. I was nineteen."

IN THE NORMAL COURSE of events, Plano police chief Bruce Glasscock rarely had to deal with anything more thrilling than an overturned semi on the Central Expressway. There had always been drugs in Plano – marijuana, a little cocaine – but they were out of

WHEN THE MEXICAN DEALERS set up shop at the Blue House in Plano, young drug consumers no longer had to venture into scary Dallas neighborhoods.

sight, under control. Now here was an explosion of serious narcotics right under his nose. And while the city fathers may have been reticent with the public, they weren't shy about putting heat on Glasscock. Almost immediately, one of his top detectives identified the source of the problem. In fact, he could practically see it out the back window of the police station: The Blue House was three blocks away.

As predicted, the press pegged Plano as the heroin capital of America – quite unfairly, since cities like Tampa, Florida; Baltimore; and Parsippany, New Jersey, were going through exactly the same thing at that moment. But the Plano angle had legs. For one thing, the kids there kept dying. When *PrimeTime Live* was about to hit town, one official said, "If this goes wrong, everybody's house is gonna be worth $50,000 less."



CHRIS COOPER, 20, escaped his addiction but could get four years in jail.

To stem the hysteria, Glasscock needed a bold gesture. Unfortunately, Texas law doesn't allow the taking of scalps. Under state drug measures, Plano's heroin dealers would face sentences of no more than ten years. But if Glasscock called in the feds, the authorities could invoke a seldom-used law passed during the drug-war hysteria of the Eighties. That law says you can get a sentence equal to a murder rap if a drug sale leads to someone's death.

In late September 1997, when the furor following Malina's death was building, Glasscock called on assistant U.S. attorney Bill Baldwin in Tyler, Texas, and together they mobilized a federally funded task force. By October, this enforcement team had hit Plano like a commando battalion. Undercover agents were all over the place, and since most of their targets were amateurs, arrests were made in no time.

Glasscock focused his investigation on the Mezas' Blue House and reached into the schools as well, bringing in local police-academy recruits to infiltrate Plano high schools. One twenty-eight-year-old earned the trust of her new peers as she revisited her own adolescence, leaving her purse open to conspicuously show off a pack of cigarettes; she would act uninterested in class, mouthing off to her teachers, slyly revealing her newly pierced tongue. The undercover operative quickly learned where to buy marijuana and, later, chiva, and before she knew it, she was being introduced to Plano's biggest dealers.

On July 23rd, 1998, Baldwin, Glasscock and the head of the Drug Enforcement Administration held a joint press conference. A thirty-six-count federal indictment was handed out. It named twenty-nine people, everyone from Ecliserio Martinez Garcia all the way down to Chris Cooper. Count Six made it clear to Cooper why he was essential to the case. He was the ultimate link in the chain that led from the Mexican dealers to the dead body of Milan Malina.

Of the twenty-nine people, seven were illegal aliens like Ecliserio and therefore perfectly cast as villains. Glasscock, Baldwin and the DEA also hauled in fourteen local Plano kids – the town's own: good students, sons of prominent citizens. If convicted, they would be in their forties when they got out.

Among the parents of the kids who died, George Malina seemed to have the clearest fix on what had happened in Plano, and he was outraged by the indictments. His empathy extended even to the young man who was accused of murdering his son. "Chris Cooper shouldn't be sent to jail," he said. "It could just as easily have been the other way around."

Malina, in fact, doesn't believe his son was a victim of heroin. He blames the drug war itself. "It was easier to get heroin than it was to get beer," he says. "Chiva became a party favor." He feels that the kids were let down by the very people who were supposed to protect them.

To begin with – in spite of Red Ribbon Days, Nancy Reagan and "Just Say No" – the school system left these kids totally unprepared for the arrival of heroin. At Plano-district schools, they had drug-sniffing dogs cruising the lockers, but they had not bothered to tell the students anything useful. Like the fact that *chiva* is the Mexican word for heroin.

But the blame goes far beyond Plano. It goes to some of the fundamental assumptions of the drug war, like the idea that we can cut narcotics off at the border. The amount of heroin needed to supply Plano for a year would fit in "a gallon jug," admits police chief Glasscock. The mules were simply walking it across on monthly trips home. It was hidden in compartments in the heels of their shoes.

And it's important to remember that the only reason the Mexicans set up shop in Plano was the money. If they could have earned a decent living growing some legitimate crop down in Guerrero, they would no doubt have jumped at the chance.

SINCE ANY JURY in Plano would likely turn into a lynch mob, the trial was shifted to Beaumont, down by the Gulf Coast, some 340 miles away. When it finally got under way, on February 2nd, one thing was clear about the government's strategy: The Mexicans were going to pay. The kids from Plano had all pleaded to lesser charges. All they had had to do to reduce their prison time was give up a few Mexicans.

Armed with the testimony of the Plano kids, prosecutors set out to convince the jury that the Martinez gang was a major international drug conspiracy, overlooking the fact that none of these so-called criminal masterminds could even afford to pay for a lawyer. The defense attorneys for the Mexicans were court appointed, all gringos who had to communicate with their clients through interpreters.

One of the defendants would not even talk to his lawyer. Jose Cleotilde Solis – "Little Cocho" – was one of the part-time players associated with the Blue House. During the big sweep of '97, he was busted with ten grams of coke and six grams of heroin. Like some of the other defendants in the federal case, he had already been tried in Texas state court, in 1998. And while it may seem unreasonable to convict somebody twice for the same events, it's not unusual in drug-war prosecutions. At the state trial, believing he would probably get probation, Solis pleaded guilty, and the judge handed him twenty-one years. These days, not surprisingly, Solis doesn't speak to lawyers. All he does is read his Bible.

The defense lawyers did their best to paint the federal charges as arbitrary and excessive, but in the end, the prosecutors held all the cards. Ecliserio Martinez Garcia, for example, had confessed and pleaded guilty in an earlier trial; according to Martinez's lawyer, the government had agreed not to use that confession but ended up disclosing it anyway. The best that the defenders could do was to chip away at the conspiracy charges, which carried the heaviest penalties. That seemed like a possible opening, since the idea that the government had nailed some international cartel was clearly laughable.

"They were trying to make these individuals out as kingpins," says attorney Garland Cardwell. "My client was the other Solis brother [Hilario], and he had been working a steady job for five or six years at a telecommunications company. He was making monthly payments on a '95 Ford pickup. If he was making all this dough off the sale of heroin, I don't know where it was going." In fact, none of the defendants seemed to be living very high on the hog. When Martinez was busted in McKinney, he was driving a four-year-old Dodge Caravan.

But despite the whiff of class warfare and racism hovering over the proceedings, the jurors quickly returned with the inevitable conclusion. They found all the Mexicans guilty of all the charges, except for Irma Lopez Vega. But before the feds could toss her back over the border, the state of Texas announced that it would retry Irma Lopez Vega in state court on the same charges.

SENTENCING for the Plano twenty-nine will probably come down in a month or so. The betting is that most of the kids will do OK but the Mexicans will go down for the full count. Of the kids, John Aaron Pruett is looking at the longest stretch. He faces a twenty-year sentence, though he may get several years sliced off in return for his testimony. Chris Cooper ultimately pleaded guilty to using a telephone in the sale of heroin, and he's almost certainly going to do four years in the federal pen.

In the wake of this overwhelming state and federal effort to prosecute the dealers, the heroin deaths continue. With the March 30th death of twenty-one-year-old David Allen of Bedford, the body count for the northern suburbs of Dallas and Fort Worth rose to at least thirty-four. In Plano proper, the scene is less frantic, because kids don't bring overdose victims to the hospital there anymore. They know better. As Larry Alexander points out, the overdose rate is rising in the surrounding suburbs. And while Chief Bruce Glasscock may feel that the heroin situation in Plano is "under control," a brief tour of the old neighborhood suggests otherwise. "I could have drugs on this table in forty-five minutes," says a friend of Chris Cooper's who is still trying to kick. "It's more available now than ever. Back then I only had one guy I could call. They busted him. Now I got three guys I can call." ○

THE GOVERNMENT'S STRATEGY at the trial was very clear: The Mexicans were going to pay.

MIKE GRAY