



SOUTH FLORIDA

Former Miami agent convicted of protecting a drug ring sent to prison for eight years

By Jay Weaver

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Before he was led out of the courtroom in handcuffs to a federal lock-up Wednesday, Alberico Crespo trembled while recounting a life of public service — starting with the U.S. Air Force and Hialeah Police Department, then pivoting to the Drug Enforcement Administration and concluding with the Health and Human Services in Miami.

“I should have acted better,” Crespo, 49, told a federal judge. “I let everyone down.”

His decades of service as a soldier, police officer and federal agent didn’t gain much sympathy from U.S. District Judge Darrin Gayles, who sent Crespo to prison for eight years. Gayles’ ruling came after he was found guilty in August of protecting a ring of Hialeah painkiller peddlers who were under investigation by his agency, Health and Human Services, and the FBI.

About 25 supporters, including his wife, other family members and colleagues, gasped over the prison term and broke into tears before Crespo said his good-byes to them.

Gayles said he had his reasons for hitting Crespo hard.

“Mr. Crespo seems to have lived a law-abiding life until this situation arose,” Gayles told the packed federal courtroom in Miami. “He was a public servant until he was not.”

Then, turning his focus to Crespo, the judge said: “Your actions were a betrayal of the public trust. Your actions were a betrayal of law enforcement.”

What shocked many of his supporters was that the judge sentenced Crespo — [who was convicted of obstructing justice but acquitted of drug trafficking](#) — to more prison time than the ringleader who sold thousands of pills of Oxycodone on the streets of Hialeah. Jorge Diaz Gutierrez, who was like a father figure to Crespo, received just over six years in prison after pleading guilty to distributing painkillers and obstructing justice in a cooperation deal that required his testimony.

Tale of the tapes

At trial in August, Diaz testified that Crespo acted as the dealer’s personal informant to protect him from getting caught by federal agents investigating a

street-level drug ring peddling Oxycodone through a doctor's office in Hialeah.

The two were so tight that the dealer rented an efficiency apartment behind the agent's Hialeah home and became his "babalawo," or high priest, during Santeria religious rituals. But under oath at the three-week trial, Diaz incriminated Crespo while testifying about numerous court-approved wiretap recordings of their cellphone conversations.

"What he's saying there is, he's not going to leave me alone in this," Diaz, 68, testified. "He was going to handle everything."

The tale of the tapes was overwhelming evidence. The 12-person federal jury found Crespo guilty of conspiring to commit witness tampering and three related charges as well as conspiring to obstruct justice. But the jury acquitted Crespo of the main charge: conspiring to distribute Oxycodone.

At his sentencing Wednesday, however, federal prosecutors said that Crespo should still be held accountable for the Hialeah ring's trafficking of Oxydone.

"This defendant knew what was going on from Day 1," Assistant U.S. Attorney Sean McLaughlin said, recommending that Crespo receive a sentence of 12-1/2 years. "Should he be held accountable for it? Absolutely."

Crespo's defense attorney, Jose Quinon, disagreed sharply with the prosecutor's reasoning, saying his client was acquitted of selling painkillers and received no money from Diaz for protecting his ring.

"Mr. Crespo was not at all involved in that," Quinon said, recommending that he receive 1-1/2 years in prison because of his years of public service before committing his crime. "Mr. Crespo didn't sell any pills."

Gayles, the judge, rejected both of their recommendations. Instead, he agreed to the sentencing guidelines proposed by the federal probation office, ranging from 6-1/2 to 8 years. Gayles chose the high end of the guidelines for Crespo's

punishment, while wondering aloud why he “would risk it all” for Diaz, the Hialeah dealer.

Crespo, who worked on a healthcare strike force with other HHS and FBI agents over the past decade, stood trial in August on charges of tipping off Diaz and his patient recruiters and pill peddlers about the federal painkiller probe.

The voluminous recordings of Diaz’s cellphone not only raised suspicions about why the dealer would be talking with the HHS agent on a daily basis for months, but the tapes also placed them in the cross-hairs of an expanding Medicare fraud probe that evolved into an FBI corruption investigation, leading to their arrests in July 2020.

“Crespo is a corrupt agent, plain and simple,” McLaughlin said at the end of Crespo’s trial, accusing him of knowing the dealer since 2016 and providing him with crucial developments in the healthcare fraud probe.

McLaughlin, who worked on the corruption case with prosecutor Christopher Clark, said Crespo even talked with Diaz about killing snitches in his pill-mill circle who might be cooperating with the feds in the investigation.

Quinon, the defense attorney, said at the end of Crespo’s trial that he knew nothing about Diaz’s illegal activities as a drug dealer nor his involvement in the painkiller-distribution racket in Hialeah — and that it was Diaz who lied about Crespo’s role in protecting him in an effort to reduce his prison sentence.

Quinon described Diaz as a “con artist,” “charlatan,” and “manipulator” who used the Health and Human Services agent as a “stooge” to protect him so that he could pocket tens of thousands of dollars in selling painkillers on the streets — all without Crespo’s knowledge. Quinon said Diaz was able to manipulate the agent through Santeria rituals involving talking to the dead and predicting the future.

“He got into the head of this guy,” Quinon told the jurors during his closing argument. “Diaz became a figure who was bigger than life to Crespo.”

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Jay Weaver *Miami Herald*    305-376-3446

Jay Weaver writes about federal crime at the crossroads of South Florida and Latin America. Since joining the Miami Herald in 1999, he's covered the federal courts nonstop, from Elian Gonzalez's custody battle to Alex Rodriguez's steroid abuse. He was part of the Herald teams that won the 2001 and 2022 Pulitzer Prizes for breaking news on Elian's seizure by federal agents and the collapse of a Surfside condo building killing 98 people. He and three Herald colleagues were 2019 Pulitzer Prize finalists for explanatory reporting on gold smuggling between South America and Miami.



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