

**A DA toppled by meth  
Panhandle prosecutor was tough on drugs, even as he abused them  
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By ARNOLD HAMILTON / The Dallas Morning News**

PAMPA, Texas – Rick Roach led a charmed life – or so it seemed.

A successful career: He was just re-elected as district attorney.

A model family: Married nearly a quarter-century, father of three handsome sons.

A powerful lineage: His stepfather – the former high school football coach – and mother are still revered in this Panhandle town, 35 years after they moved away.

Which makes what happened over the last month all the more bewildering: The tough-on-drugs prosecutor who showed little mercy – even to those who considered him a friend – was himself busted for methamphetamine and cocaine possession, pleaded guilty in federal court and resigned from office.

"I have a zillion questions," said his wife, Cynthia, "but no one is telling me anything.

"No one."

While Mr. Roach's lightning-swift fall from grace caught many in his hometown by surprise, it also underscored what some law officers regard as an undeniable fact of modern Texas life: The scourge of methamphetamine is spreading, even into the upper echelons of communities as conservative and straight-laced as Pampa.

Indeed, state figures show a fivefold increase between 1998 and 2002 in the number of Gray County residents turning to publicly funded treatment programs for methamphetamine problems.

"We've been fighting it for years," said Gray County Judge Richard Peet, who lamented Mr. Roach's problems as especially disheartening since so much of his prosecutorial persona was built around hard-nosed drug enforcement.

Still, Mr. Peet said, it's important to note that Mr. Roach's arrest, guilty plea and resignation illustrate that "no one is above the law."

Signs of trouble

What happened to Richard J. Roach?

In retrospect, associates say, the signs pointed to a life overtaken by addiction to illicit drugs. There were wild mood swings: barking conflicting orders, berating underlings. There was paranoia: Office doors always locked, guns loaded.

"It was volatile," said David Holmes, a Borger attorney who worked as Mr. Roach's assistant between 2001 and 2003. "The people in the office were afraid of him. That was no mystery."

Lynn Switzer, the current assistant district attorney, said she and others in the office had suspicions that Mr. Roach, 55, was abusing illegal drugs: "But like any good prosecutor, you don't go forward until you have the evidence."

It's even more precarious, associates said, when the suspect is your boss – which is one of the reasons that federal authorities said they took up the case, with help from inside the district attorney's office and from state troopers who investigated illicit drug trafficking along nearby Interstate 40.

In a federal court affidavit, Rebecca Bailey, a district attorney's secretary, said she twice witnessed Mr. Roach using methamphetamine.

A syringe with methamphetamine residue was found floating in the toilet in the courthouse restroom used exclusively by the district attorney's office.

And state troopers alleged that Mr. Roach offered them Rolex watches and other incentives to emphasize money seizures in drug cases. State law allows such funds to be split between the law enforcement agency and prosecuting attorney's office.

At the time of his arrest, authorities said, Mr. Roach – alone – controlled bank accounts with at least a half-million dollars in seized drug money.

None of the federal charges against Mr. Roach involved financial misconduct. It is still possible that Mr. Roach could face state charges, though no decision is expected until after Gov. Rick Perry appoints a successor.

Federal and state prosecutors declined to discuss the specifics of their investigation, including how Mr. Roach began using methamphetamine – or how he got it.

Outside the small, insular world of the district attorney's office, few seemed to have a clue that anything was amiss.

"I was just sitting here in my office, minding my own business," said Gray County Sheriff Don Copeland, "when two FBI agents – one from Dallas and one from Abilene – walked in and said, 'Guess what we just did?' "

When FBI agents intercepted Mr. Roach outside a Gray County courtroom on Jan. 11 and took him into custody, it turned this town of about 18,000 upside down.

#### A rich family history

Though many said they didn't know the district attorney well, they did know his mother and stepfather, Evelyn and Weldon Trice – and that was reason enough to embrace Mr. Roach when he entered politics.

Mr. Trice, known as "Bird Dog," was an educator, principal and Pampa High School's football coach. He later became a dean at West Texas A&M University. Mrs. Trice was a banker. They were stalwarts in the Baptist church.

"Fine people," said Bill Potts, a retired teacher who coached Mr. Roach's seventh-grade basketball team.

What many didn't know about Mr. Roach, though, was his roller-coaster past, starting with his childhood and a family forged by tragedy.

Mr. Roach was only 6 months old in February 1950 when his father, Lavern, *Ring* magazine's 1947 rookie of the year, tried to jump-start his boxing career with a bout in New York City. The 24-year-old ex-Marine dominated much of the fight, but was staggered by a wild right late in the bout. He took a beating in the final two rounds, lapsed into a coma and died the next day of a brain hemorrhage.

Twenty months later, his widow, Evelyn, married Weldon Trice, a former West Texas football standout whose first wife had died unexpectedly. Each brought two children to the union. One would eventually become district attorney for five Texas Panhandle counties.

#### A rise and swift fall

Rick Roach first spent a decade as Roberts County attorney, based in the tiny Panhandle burg of Miami (pronounced My-AM-uh), 22 miles northeast of Pampa. By 1996, though, he wanted more – and he had a specific prize in mind: district attorney for Gray, Hemphill, Lipscomb, Roberts and Wheeler Counties.

But Mr. Roach had some personal blotches on his adult life: A drunken driving arrest in Lubbock in 1975. A Stephens County indictment in 1988 for stealing natural gas, dismissed when he paid about \$2,400 in restitution.

During the 1996 campaign, Mr. Roach told the *Canadian Record* in Canadian, Texas, that he was taking medication for clinical depression. He also said he previously underwent treatment for alcohol abuse and had "succumbed to peer pressure" to use marijuana and amphetamines while in the military.

Mr. Roach's first bid for district attorney failed. But he finally knocked off District Attorney John Mann in 2000 and was re-elected last fall.

Mr. Mann, who branded Mr. Roach an "outlaw," said he's felt certain for at least a year that something bizarre was happening with Mr. Roach.

"I figured, 'He'll self-destruct some day,' " said Mr. Mann, now in full-time private practice in Pampa. "And darned if he didn't."

For many here, Mr. Roach's demise was alternately disheartening and embarrassing.

Disheartening that a son of Pampa – not to mention the son of a revered family – could fall so far, so fast, addicted to methamphetamine. And embarrassing that their chief prosecutor, who rarely showed mercy for those battling drug addiction, could soil their community's reputation.

"It was quite a shock, really," said Bill Hulse, 74, who owns the downtown barber shop where Mr. Roach occasionally dropped by to visit, drink coffee and read the papers.

Some, like brick mason Harley Knutson, are struggling to make sense of it all. He considers Mr. Roach a friend, but can't forget that the DA turned a deaf ear to Mr. Knutson's plea for help for his drug-addicted son.

Mike Knutson, a former Pampa firefighter, pleaded guilty last year to methamphetamine possession and was given a deferred sentence. Harley Knutson – and Mike Knutson's lawyer – urged Mr. Roach to find some place, any place, even jail, to put him until a bed opened in a state-sponsored rehab center.

"Mike had said he couldn't stay off drugs," Harley Knutson said. "Rick Roach said that's Mike's problem. He's got to stay clean until a bed comes open."

He couldn't. He ended up failing a court-mandated drug test. And he was ordered to serve a 10-year sentence in a Texas prison.

"It's hard when he [Mr. Roach] comes down so hard on my son and didn't have a lot of mercy for getting him help with the addiction we all knew he had – and at the same time he [Mr. Roach] was so heavy into drugs," Harley Knutson said.

Despite his reputation as a tough prosecutor, Mr. Roach rarely handled criminal cases himself. But those who worked with – and against – Mr. Roach said he routinely demanded his assistants seek maximum punishment in drug cases.

In a July 2003 interview with the *Amarillo Globe-News*, he explained his hard-nosed philosophy: "I think it's quite clear that the good citizens of this district are fed up with drugs. A lot of these folks have children and grandchildren. They are smart, and they understand the effect drugs have on families and communities."

Mr. Roach's assistant, Ms. Switzer, saw it differently.

"Rick was a politician," she said. "He was constantly concerned with how the public perceived him. The decisions he made were based strictly on public perception."

Mr. Roach's family life wasn't as Hallmark card-perfect as the photos in campaign advertisements suggested, either. Twice, his wife, Cynthia, filed for divorce – contending in 1987 that Mr. Roach's "ungovernable temper" caused her to fear for her safety, as well as her children's. In 1989, she was granted a temporary restraining order against her husband. Eventually, though, she dropped both divorce cases.

The couple, she said, was living apart again last fall, but had begun working in earnest in late December and early January to reconcile. She declined to say whether she suspected drug use, but did acknowledge her husband seemed "agitated" at times.

"Actually," she said, "I thought everything was going fine until that morning he was arrested."

On the receiving end

Mr. Roach pleaded guilty in Amarillo federal court last week to being an addict or unlawful drug user in possession of a firearm. He faces a maximum 10 years in prison and up to a \$250,000 fine. He probably won't be sentenced for six to eight weeks.

He also submitted his resignation as district attorney.

Mr. Roach has been staying with his parents in Canyon. His movements are monitored electronically. He is prohibited from leaving Potter or Randall counties in the Texas Panhandle.

Three other charges were dismissed as part of a plea agreement, including possession of methamphetamine with intent to distribute and possession of cocaine with intent to distribute. Those charges could have brought an additional 41 years and \$2.25 million in fines.

The deal didn't set well with Mr. Knutson, the brick mason who felt his methamphetamine-addicted son didn't receive much sympathy from Mr. Roach.

"They weren't quite as adamant about getting him [Mr. Roach] as he was someone else," Mr. Knutson said. "He's sending kids out of Gray County from 50 to 90 years for doing seemingly less than what he was doing.

"Now, they're going to draw it down [for him] to 10 years. If he spends any time in jail on those charges, I'll be surprised."

Cynthia Roach described her husband of nearly 25 years as something of an eccentric, an overachiever who battled depression. "He loves his family. He loves his boys, anyway," she said.

Mrs. Roach, 49, said she and her three sons – 23-year-old James, a college student; and 18-year-old twins Kris and Kyler, seniors at Miami High School – are living day-by-day, struggling to cope with so many unknowns, waiting to see the punishment a federal judge metes out to her husband, their father.

"You don't know what your future holds," she said. "You have your family intact – or semi-intact – one day and then ..."