

GRAZIA
EXCLUSIVE

I WAS AMERICA'S MOST-WANTED DRUGS BARON

'Queen of Meth' Lori Arnold-Woten explains how her world fell apart – and why she's happier now without her fortune

SOMETIMES I hate my job working in a call centre. I make sales calls all day and often people swear at me or even threaten me over the phone.

I go home to a modest house, and to my neighbours and colleagues I probably seem like a quiet, middle-aged woman.

What they don't know is that I have a secret: I was once the most dangerous drug baron in America.

Wanted by the FBI for running an international drug ring, I was the woman who introduced methamphetamine (known as ice in Australia) to America.

I was born one of seven step and half-siblings in Ottumwa, a farming town in rural Iowa. I was just a normal kid who studied hard, but I dropped out of high school and by 1986 I was a housewife, living with my then-husband Floyd Stockdall and our 2-year-old son Josh. We lived in a small cabin on the river – it was all we could afford.

Ottumwa was suffering from massive unemployment and depression in the 1980s, and I was at home, unhappy and bored.

One day, my husband's brother came around with some powder he told me was called "biker dope". In fact it was "ice". He emptied a small paper packet of the white methamphetamine onto my kitchen table. Using a rolled up, dirty one dollar note, we snorted it.

The effect was instant.

I smiled for the first time in ages, and as we snorted more, we began having fun, laughing and dancing.

I was given some more of it to take down to the local bar, where I shared it out. We partied all night long, and suddenly everyone wanted more.

"You know you could make a lot

of money selling this stuff," my brother-in-law told me.

At the time I had a measly budget of just \$50 a week to spend on groceries and nappies for my son.

I just wanted enough money to buy more food, to keep Josh fed and give him everything he needed...

So I bought a gram for \$60 and sold it instantly for \$100.

I learned to cut it into quarters, selling small parcels of the powder for \$25 each to friends. It was easy.

I quickly moved up the food chain, buying ice in bulk from Kansas.

I justified it in my mind because for the first time I was able to provide for my son – I know that's hard for some people to understand, and sometimes I did feel guilty about selling people drugs, but I believed my own arguments.

I did my first line of ice in 1984 and by 86 I was running a massive drug distribution business along with my husband. On any given day I'd be carrying hundreds of thousands of dollars in my purse.

I soon had so much money I didn't know what to do with it, so I had to stuff it in the walls of my house.

But I was taking more and more ice. I was snorting it day and night and would stay up for days and weeks at a time, completely unable to sleep and neglecting my son.

One night I remember driving down the road but I was so spaced out from staying up three nights in a row I nearly drove straight towards an oncoming truck. Thankfully the driver started honking just in time.

I nearly died that night, and I recall tearfully wondering what Josh would do without his mother.

I was soon to find out.

In 1991 the government took certain chemicals off the market,

"Soon I was snorting ice day and night, staying up for weeks at a time"

so buying the 50-gallon drums of P2P chemicals I needed to make the drugs became so much harder.

I'd hired my own chemist, and built a state-of-the-art computerised ice lab in my backyard.

I had gone from living in that rundown cabin to owning a 70ha horse ranch, 14 houses, \$75,000 in jewellery, a garage full of sports cars and even several planes.

But the operation had got too big to go unnoticed, and undercover surveillance officers were assigned to catch me. They picked up evidence of my \$11 million ice trade.

In January 1991 my home was raided. Federal agents burst in, pushed me to the ground and pressed a gun to my head.

I was so tired, having been on a four-day ice bender, that I couldn't even put up a struggle.

Josh was there, now 10 years old, and he was scared to death. He was in his pyjamas and was crying.

I knew I was going to jail. I looked at my son, sobbing, and I felt so bad for him.

Worse was to come. My arrest caused international headlines because my brother Tom Arnold was a famous actor and was about to marry actress Roseanne Barr at the time.

I was served with a 31-count indictment and, despite Tom and Roseanne turning up to court with ▶



Lori with baby Josh, brother Tom (right) and ex-sister-in-law Roseanne (below)



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\$400,000 in cash for bail, I was kept in prison.

Josh had to go to my mother's, but then she died and he was moved again, this time to live with my dad.

But as I awaited my trial, I told Josh: “Everything will be OK, I'll be home in a year.”

He believed it, and so did I.

Then came the biggest shock. After a court hearing, my lawyer said to me: “We can get you a good deal if you enter a plea agreement; you should plea for 25 years.”

I couldn't believe what I'd just heard – 25 years? My hands started to shake uncontrollably.

The lawyer added: “If you don't, you'll get life, and you won't see your son for a very long time.”

So I pleaded guilty and was convicted of one count of continuing a criminal enterprise, drug trafficking, multiple counts of money laundering and possession, and, of course, distribution and manufacture of ice.

The court case was so emotional. I tried to remain strong and smile for the jury, but whenever they mentioned my boy I broke down, sobbing in the stand. Eventually they gave me 12 years, of which I served eight, and all my assets were seized.

Prison was horrendous. It felt like my life was on hold. I just threw myself into exercise and work and

I sent every cent back to my son.

I felt so guilty that he had lost his mum and dad to drugs and jail.

I used to live for the days my brother would bring Josh to visit. Every time he showed up at visitors' hour he'd grown so much – but every time he left I'd be destroyed about missing him growing up and the fact he was having to come to prison to see me.

When I got out in 1999, Josh was about to turn 18; I'd missed so much of his life.

At first I tried to go straight, working at a meat-packing plant, but I hated it. Getting \$300 a week feels bad when you remember earning \$300,000 in the same time.

So when someone offered me the chance to sell an “eight-ball” (3.5g) of ice, I jumped at the chance.

I thought that as long as I could keep it under control, I wouldn't get caught. Within weeks I'd bought a bar with my profits.

Business was up and running again... And, predictably, I hit the ice harder than ever before, sleeping no more than one night a week, going on massive binges.

I paid a friend \$5 for a cup of her daughter's urine to pass drug tests and then bought another Jaguar.

Then on October 25, 2005, I sold some ice to a man in a supermarket carpark. The minute he handed

me the cash, I knew he was an undercover narcotics cop.

I suddenly saw a lot of officers running towards my car and I tried to lock the doors, but then the guns came out. I just stared out of the windscreen as they told me I was under arrest.

Josh was so angry he told me he'd never speak to me again.

Because of everything he and I have been through, he's very anti-drugs. After all, they were responsible for taking me away from him.

This time I decided I'd get clean in prison, and this time would be my last. I became addicted to exercise instead of drugs. I slept and ate a lot and while it was hard to stay clean, I stuck to it.

I was released three years ago and I'm still on probation, yet I am proud to say I am now clean and sober. I report to a monthly probation officer and the authorities still watch my bank account for anything “exciting”.

But today, while I earn a measly wage at the call centre, at least I'm certain there's no going back to ice.

I am the woman who had it all: the planes, the cars, the gold and the horses – but that stuff doesn't mean anything to me.

The one thing I lost that hurt the most was my son, but thankfully now I have him back in my life. I am proud that he's training to be a teacher and we are very close again.

Like many people who take ice, my life spiralled out of control. I'm just thankful I'm alive to tell my story and be with my son, who's now 30.

I certainly couldn't imagine being involved with drugs again.

I was responsible for so many people taking ice and sometimes I do feel guilty about it, but I've learned to live with that and look to the future. ■

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