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**The Real RAY DONOVAN on Drugs After El Chapo, the Opioid Crisis, Prince’s Death**

**(and much more)**

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INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

**NUNYO DEMASIO**: Okay, I'm here with Ray Donovan, the special agent in charge of the Drug Enforcement Agency's New York office -- the DEA's biggest operation in the country. Thanks for accommodating the "Nunyo and Company podcast" in your Manhattan headquarters. Appreciate it.

**RAY DONOVAN**: Oh, you're welcome, Nunyo. I'm glad to be participating. And welcome to the New York Field Division of the DEA.

**NUNYO**: Thanks. You know, you oversaw the historic operation that helped apprehend Joaquin Guzman, a.k.a. El Chapo, the legendary drug trafficker. So now that he's in solitary confinement, what are your main responsibilities?

**RAY**: Well, my responsibilities still go on. The DEA is really in charge of pursuing national, international drug trafficking cartels throughout the world, really. Chapo being arrested and sentenced doesn’t change our mission, our role. As these Mexican and other international, transnational organized criminal groups affect the United States, our job is to pursue them, to apprehend them and to bring them to justice.

**NUNYO**: Okay, I just — just before the interview I went into Ray’s office, and I saw the t-shirt — the jail shirt that El Chapo wore before he was extradited while he was in prison in Mexico.There were, I think 22 agencies targeting him. How did you end up with that t-shirt in your office? [Laughs]

**RAY**: Right, so, that’s a really long story but I can say this: There were 22 different agencies, United States and Mexican agencies that partnered up to pursue El Chapo. The reason why I got this shirt? It was given to me by the Mexican — or the Mexico regional director for DEA because of my role — or our role in pursuing him as it related to what we did to apprehend Chapo. So that’s why the shirt is with me. But there were so many other people that played a role — a really integral role in pursuing El Chapo and others.

**NUNYO**: Ahem. Okay, that’s a bold display. And you aggressively pursue some of the most violent people — criminals on earth. Once, El Chapo had a rival killed because he declined to shake his hand in a, I think, a peace meeting. So do you fear for your life?

**RAY:** No. I think when you’re in our line of work, it comes with the territory as far as this is what our job is. And I think when you have these international criminals, they also see it as their role is to avoid law enforcement. And so as part of their chosen path, if you will, that we are constantly going to be pursuing them, looking for them to arrest them, apprehend them and bring them to justice. So in the case of El Chapo, it’s no different. He decided early on in his life that he was going to be part of the drug game. And in doing that, you incur risks. And those risks are not just in Mexico, but every country that he’s pushing drugs to, or had pushed drugs to. And so that means, that government, those law enforcement agencies were going to pursue him. And in this case, that’s exactly what we did. Certainly, drug trafficking organizations here in the United States, they understand that they are in the business to try to make money. Right? But they are also trying to avoid us — to the best that they can. So it’s part of the game: is doing exactly that. And so we’re doing our jobs. I did my job, just like every other agent that is doing their job — to really safeguard human lives, and protect communities all across America.

**NUNYO**: Okay, but the risk goes both ways though. I mean, there have been DEA agents who have died in the line of duty.

**RAY**: Sure.

**NUNYO**: And when I was coming in and going through security, I saw the huge poster of Enrique Kiki Camarena. So I just want to spend a few minutes talking about him: He died in 1985. It’s probably the most infamous murder of DEA agent. He was abducted. I believe he was going to see his wife, and he was abducted by members of the Guadalajara cartel. And they tortured him over a couple of years [days]. They crushed his skull, I believe with a tire iron, and they drilled a hole in his head with some kind of power toll.So that’s I mean. You don’t —

**RAY:** Sure. When you think about Kiki and others that have paid the ultimate sacrifice on behalf of the United States, yes they did. There’s no doubt about it. But it was also different, the way we investigated these groups throughout the generations, going back to 1971. What was happening in the 80s compared to what was happening in the 90s is: technology changed how these organizations function, and it also changed how we operated as well. And so historically, there was a lot more undercover investigations where we’re doing meets with bad guys in hotels and motels. And things have evolved just because of globalization and change and how these Mexican, Columbian cartels actually operate today. They’re much more adept. They’re much more tech savvy. They’re much more global by nature. So even within the DEA, how we have evolved has changed some of our strategies towards pursuing these groups. So things such as — I’m not saying that we don’t put our lives on the line because we certainly do. I mean anytime we hit a door, we don’t what’s behind a door. We still take many, many guns off the streets, all across America. Kiki, and others here in New York, have certainly paid the ultimate sacrifice. You can go throughout the history of DEA, and there were brave men and women that did that. But things have also evolved is what I’m saying to you, and how we pursue these groups has also changed, too.

**NUNYO**: Right. And just to give listeners some more background on Kiki. He was undercover, and he discovered a huge marijuana plantation, and then that led to the Mexican army destroying it. I think it was worth potentially billions to the cartel. So they killed him. And the U.S. government — I think it was one of their greatest manhunts ever, and they captured several captives [members], put them in jail. But have you ever been threatened?

**RAY:** Sure, I’ve been threatened. I’ve been threatened. You know, when I first came on the job is when I did most of my undercover. So that’s 24 years ago now. When you do undercover, it’s really intimate. You’re meeting with a bad guy, and you don’t know what they have on them. They don’t know anything about you. It is a very risky scenario that we put ourselves in. There’s no question about it. So have I been threatened? Yes. No question about it. But I’m also pretty confident in how I go about doing my business as well. When you talk about Kiki, like I said: Those are different times. But we have not forgotten, nor will we forget because one of the main architects of what happened to Kiki is out and about in Mexico to this day.

**NUNYO**: Mm-hmm. And that leads me to my next question because I know: There’ve been — His story has been depicted in documentaries and film. But it seems like the DEA — he never faded from memories even before Hollywood started to tell his story. Right?

**RAY**: That’s right. We always recall what happened. We always remember what happened to Kiki Camarena. But not only to Kiki, but all of our other fallen brothers and sisters. There’s no question about it. I think it’s important that we recognize them because they paid the ultimate sacrifice.And not only them as individuals but their families their families, their neighborhoods — they also pay a lifelong cost for their bravery to be honest with you. So each year, we do recognize them. Every day that there is a memorial for an individual that passed, we recognized that day. And we also pursue as an agency, some of those criminals that were involved with [the deaths] — in particular with Kiki Camarena.

**NUNYO**: I think it’s pretty cool that his son, Enrique Jr. I think he’s a judge in San Diego; and he was 11 when his dad died. And so that puts him, you know, in his mid-40s. And I think he was a prosecutor before that, so that’s pretty cool. Now, how many DEA agents have died over, just…? Isn’t there like a wall? A DEA Wall or something?

**RAY**: Yup, there is. But I don’t know the exact number to be honest with you.

**NUNYO**: But it’s not a small number, right?

**RAY**: It’s not a small number.

**NUNYO**: Yeah, that’s what made me curious. Because in even interviews, you’re pretty assertive. And I’m like, “man: These guys are dangerous. Doesn’t Ray…[“Laughter]

**RAY:** Right. I get it. They’re dangerous but they’re also businessmen. And they also recognize that they want to stay undercover as far as — to the best of their abilities. If you put the spotlight of the United States government on them, they want to avoid that at all costs.

**NUNYO**: And the Guadalajara cartel was pretty much dismantled after.

**RAY**: And that’s what happened.

**NUNYO**: Right.

**RAY**: That’s correct.

**NUNYO**: So in the infamous Rolling Stones interview that was published in early 2016, I’m going to quote El Chapo. He said, “The day I don’t exist, drug trafficking is not going to decrease in anyway at all. So fast forward to January 31, 2019, wrapping up the trial of the century, and the authorities in Phoenix — the border authorities in Phoenix announced a seizure of the biggest fentanyl seizure in U.S. history**.** I think it was, uhh…I don’t know the pounds or whatever, but they called it the biggest in U.S. history. Did you have mixed [feelings?] for that because you helped put away El Chapo but the same day, you know, they’re having closing arguments, there’s this huge, you know —

**RAY**: Seizure. So his statement about drugs not going away once he ceases to exit, we didn’t pursue him for that reason. We pursued him because he’s a criminal that broke the law; and affected the lives of millions and millions of people across America.It wasn’t something where we anticipated for the drug trade to slow down with his absence. Not at all. He’s a criminal who’s breaking the law. And that’s how the DEA certainly recognized that. Now, he happened to be the biggest criminal, who affected the United States more than any other particular individual in Mexico as far at the criminal element, or organized crime in Mexico.So I’d stay his statement is correct to the point that it’s not going to change but it will change but it will change in some ways because the one thing that Chapo was was: he was innovative. So he’s the individual that came up with: let’s dig tunnels, and send mass amounts of drugs through tunnels. He’s a — They called him Rapido, which means fast, right? Because he would turn around the money that was generated in the United States back down to the Columbians really fast. So his logistics network was just different. It was a lot more fluid, a lot more flexible. So he was an innovative drug trafficker. And so when you say, “Okay, will things change?” They’ve certainly changed to that degree. Now, you don’t have the same type of person that — or individuals that — like he was. He understood how to move things from South America into Central America into Mexico and into the United States. And so as it relates to that, there is a change. But you’re talking about fentanyl, and fentanyl is an entire ‘nother story because fentanyl is coming from China. And so that is a game changer for us; and we see that because it’s synthetic. And so it just comes in different ways, but it’s synthetic. It could be made in a laboratory, and it is being made by hundreds of kilos now.

**NUNYO**: Right. Let me ask you really quick. I saw that the haul, the seizure, it said, had the potential 100 million overdoses. When I saw that, I was like: Is that a typo? Because that’s — if my math is correct, that’s like one for almost every three Americans ‘cause I think there’s like 320 million Americans. So the Sinaloa cartel thrived, you know, as you pointed out because of — largely because El Chapo was able to ship vast amounts of drugs. So have you guys been able to dismantle some of the smuggling routes, some of the infrastructure, that he took a lot of credit for?

RAY: Sure. So, there’s a couple questions in that?

**NUNYO**: Right.

**RAY**: The first thing is: two milligrams of fentanyl is considered lethal. So thing about one kilo. It’s 500,000 dosage units at two milligrams. So it’s enough to kill that many people within one kilo. So when you see, okay, 50 kilos of fentanyl, you’re talking million and millions of people that can potentially die.

**NUNYO**: Wow.

**RAY**: That’s how powerful the drug is. And that’s why the Mexican cartels — in particular, Sinaloa, started lacing their heroin with fentanyl to make it more potent. To answer the second part of that is: in the last six months alone, the DEA, working with our counterparts in Mexico, have taken down 10 different manufacturing conversion fentanyl labs in Mexico. And so what does that mean? Well, we’ve taken down these labs that are full production, meaning precursor chemicals all the way to full fentanyl as well as conversion labs; whereas precursor chemicals would come in, you add one more chemical such Propranolol chloride into 4ANPP and APP, and it become fentanyl, and their mixing that with heroin, and then smuggling it across the border. So we have taken down 10 labs in the last six months alone.

**NUNYO**: That’s tremendous. Was any of that partly because El Chapo was behind bars, or is that totally separate?

**RAY**: So you gotta go back to when the fentanyl really started taking a hold here in the United States. And that’s 2011, 2012. Chapo was operating at that point. So we know that Sinaloa, the Sinaloans: the confederation organization that is the Sinaloa cartel, were among the first to lace their heroin with fentanyl. We first started seeing it — The first time we saw it in Toluca, Mexico in 2006. We took down a lab that really didn’t take hold — a fentanyl lab — that really didn’t take hold in — throughout the United States markets. The next time we saw it was around 2011, 2012, when we start seeing the precursor chemicals coming in from China; and then smuggled into Southern California, and then brought across the border into Mexico, converted into fentanyl mixed with heroin. That was Chapo’s doing. And so when you talk about these successes that we’ve had in the last six months, it’s starts really from us getting an understanding of how the international organizations, criminal networks [were] moving fentanyl, the methodologies, and starting to infiltrate them to the best of our ability, to expose them; and take them down.

**NUNYO**: Okay. So let’s talk about the opioid epidemic. It’s caused tends of thousands of deaths each years. I saw another ridiculous number — I think the record was 49,000 in 2017. You know, that’s a stunning number. Another statistic is that drug overdoses are now the leading cause of deaths for American under 50. How does the DEA convey the urgency to the public without the public, you know, becoming desensitized because those numbers just sound crazy.

**RAY**: Well, they’re not crazy. I mean, it is the reality that we’re living in. What I’d say is this: In 2013, when we first saw that fentanyl was coming into the United States, we put out a national alert, to all law enforcement agencies — government agencies and state and local agencies to make them aware that the fentanyl was coming in, and it’s being smuggled and being mixed with heroin. So we took control of that, just getting the word out. Today, as you just read, I think the public is aware — more and more aware of the fact that fentanyl is as deadly as it is. What they may not be aware of is the fact that fentanyl is being laced into other drugs — not just heroin but also methamphetamine, cocaine, and in some instances even marijuana.

**NUNYO**: Right. And so, fentanyl is the — really the biggest problem in the opioid crisis, right? I saw that it killed Prince and then it also killed Tom Petty. So let me just, you know, give a few basics from what I know. And then I’ll ask you for following up with insight. It’s a synthetic drug — easily created in labs using chemicals, as you pointed out. It’s manufactured in China. And it’s even more potent than heroin. Couple of milligrams, similar to a few grains of salt, and that can be deadly. I want you to talk about — I read that at same time, it’s relatively dirt cheap to make. So is the fact that it’s inexpensive part of the reason it’s such a deadly drug?

**RAY**. Yes. So that’s part of the reason why it took a hold in United States is because it is cheap, right. So one kilo, as little as $4,000, as much as $10,000, but it generate millions dollars. So if you have a Mexican cartel or organization that is growing poppy fields, or cultivating poppy fields in the mountains of Durango, Sinaloa, Chihuahua, or even south down in Guerrero, that takes about three months to harvest. Alright? So you’re talking about the growth, harvest, watch — watching over these fields — protecting these fields. And then converting that from heroin paste into a refined heroin. It’s process there, about four months. Where as organizations like Sinaloa cartel could very easily just purchase their fentanyl from China, have it smuggled into Mexico, and then smuggled across the southwest border to destination cities such as New York or New England. And so the business model has evolved as well.

**NUNYO**: So I read somewhere that a $3,000 investment in fentanyl will get you several — has the potential to get a drug dealer several hundred thousand dollars. I mean that’s like, Warren — I’m not sure if you’re into stocks but that’s like Warren Buffett’s investment in Berkshire Hathaway like years ago. I mean, is that an exaggeration? Three thousand dollars can get you hundreds of thousands of dollars?

**RAY**: It’s not an exaggeration.

**NUNYO**: Wow.

**RAY**: But it also can get you life in prison.

**NUNYO**: Right, right. Of course.

**RAY**: And so behind that is the overdoses — the overdose deaths that are coming from that. And so now more and more federal prosecutors are charging those individuals that are knowingly distributing fentanyl to these groups there are causing people to die. And so that’s what we had going on across the nation. The money that is generated from fentanyl — that is definitely lucrative. There’s no question about it. But the danger behind it is more potent than anything that we’ve seen.

**NUNYO**: And you’ve given a lot of the blame to El Chapo because he helped popularize lacing other drugs with fentanyl. So talk about that. I think it’s started around — after 2010. Now, all fentanyl is being put all sorts of drugs. Talk about his role, and what’s happening now.

**RAY**: So you have to understand Mexican culture — understand — as far as the Mexican cartels go. Right? So the Columbians — the DEA, Homeland Security, FBI — all of our federal partners working with the Columbian government have done a fairly decent job of pursuing some of the higher up Columbian cartel organizations, and have them prosecuted here in the United States. So the Columbians adapted. They’ve changed. They spread their cocaine markets throughout the world. And so the Mexicans were losing out of the cocaine trade because now you have Columbians that are in places like Spain, and Netherlands and Germany — and all throughout Europe, and in some instances, Western Africa as well. Canada — another place. And so when this is happening, the Mexicans, they don’t — Coca is not a natural crop in Mexico but poppy is. So they adapted in many instances — the Columbian methodology of producing or manufacturing heroin. It just wasn’t as strong as Columbian heroin. So they added fentanyl to it to make it stronger and to get the market addicted, or the people addicted here in the United States is one of the factors that’s behind the opioid crisis.

**NUNYO**: Okay, and they… But they are unable to calibrate they put in other drugs so it’s killing their customers. That doesn’t any sense. If you’re — You said they are businessmen. If you’re a businessman, why would you sell something that’s killing your customer base. Please explain that to me.

**RAY**: Well, there’s no quality control, I mean, in the drug trade. Right? And think about what happens. When it first started — when fentanyl first started happening here in the United States, people were dying in places like Staten Island, in New England, in the Bronx, in Brooklyn. And after word got out that people were dying from this strong — they called it “China White” on the street — people were dying from it. Other uses were going to try that same drug. And so because it was so powerful — and so it attracted more and more people. When you talk about from a business perspective that that the Mexican cartels were killing off their customer base — yes, they were. They started adding other opioids as well, like tramadol to heroin to try to ease it back, but it was already too late. Now, more and more, you have a user population that has built up tolerance to fentanyl. And they are asking for just fentanyl. They’ve gotten beyond in some instances — beyond just heroin.

**NUNYO**: Wow. Wow. And, talk about — You talked about China’s role earlier. You know, some Chinese officials have said that they are taking too much of the blame. That yes, it’s mostly from there. But they say that there are other countries that play a big role in directly having it come to the United States, do you buy that? Are there any countries under the radar? We know that China is the main manufacturer, but do they have a point there at all?

**RAY**: Well, the first thing I would say is this: As far as the DEA is considered, we do work with China. And we work many of our investigations alongside the Chinese police as well. As far as manufacturing and where fentanyl is coming from, the vast majority of our investigations go back to China. Now, other countries play a role, certainly. Yeah: Mexico is another country that plays a role. When we talk about how the fentanyl is coming in to the United States, there’s really two methodologies: one is through express service providers, directly from China; meaning like the FedExes, the DHLs, UPS, even our postal although the has subsided somewhat. And the other is through the southwest border. The Chinese instituted regulation on all variations — fentanyl, fentanyl analogues as of May 1 this year. Our hope is that we will see a drop of fentanyl coming to the United States at least by way of express mail service providers. The other thing that happened is: we started working a lot more closer to our partners, and sharing a lot more information to pursuing some of these Chinese chemical companies and chemists that are knowingly sending the dead substance to the United States. But will that stop the flow in — directly into Mexico? That’s another challenge for us.

**NUNYO**: Now, the Trump administration, you know, pressed China to crack down; and China has promised to crack down. You’re saying you’re working with them. Have you seen any changes since they’ve promised to crack down? Any significant changes?

**RAY**: Yes. So the changes right now are through the airports. So we do not — we’re not seizing fentanyl like we once did coming into JFK directly from China in the small packages like we once did. And so that’s a good sign. But it’s too early. The metrics aren’t really there for us to determine if that’s just kind of an anomaly or something sustainable. And so it’s [the verdict is] still out. It has not slowed down as far as coming across the border. But if we can control one way, then we can put a lot more resources toward the other way.

**NUNYO**: And now with the mobile phone, talk about the role that the mobile phone has given users to get drugs. You mentioned technology earlier — to get drugs — you mentioned technology earlier — to get drugs that they couldn’t, you know use [to] get in that way, say, 20 years ago. Talk about the role of the mobile phone.

**RAY**: Sure, sure. Technology has really made the world a lot smaller. And it’s nothing that people don’t already know. Globalization. But that also has enabled criminal organizations to reach out across the world, and connect to criminal groups throughout the world. And one space would be in the dark web. Dark web markets such as Alpha Bay or Silk Road or Dream or Wall Street or Nightmare. These are dark web spaces where criminals throughout the world are buying and selling narcotics. But it’s not only narcotics, but really every illicit item you can find in the dark web space. And you can order it up and have it shipped to your door step. We also see the user population going into the same space to get their drugs and have it shipped to their door step. So no longer do they have to go down a dark alley, and meet with a drug dealer. They can go right to the internet, and have their drugs shipped to their house. So technology has changed. The other thing that’s happened is: drug traffickers no longer need to necessarily go to Mexico or Columbia or any other place to meet up with a source of supply. They can just go on line. And in many instances, it’s open internet, and then from there, they’ll go to the dark, dark web to expand their networks. But we’re certainly in that space as well.

**NUNYO**: So the opioid epidemic occurred in three waves. The first wave: Early 90s, overdoses trigged by an increase in pain medication, especially Oxycontin. The second wave, 2010, after a crackdown in prescription abuse led to a spike heroin deaths. The third wave, [2013], the unprecedented deaths related to fentanyl. I wanted to know what — is there a current — the latest iteration? Is there another trend now that’s not getting a lot of attention in the media?

**RAY**: Well, there is a trend. The biggest trend right now that’s taking place is meth production — methamphetamine production. Two things that are happening globally. One is cocaine production in the Andean region of South America is through the roof. But now, cocaine is [a] more global, drug of choice throughout the world. The second thing is: meth, methamphetamine production is through the roof. In the last three years alone, the DEA, working with our Mexican partners, we have taken down over 300 laboratories in northern Mexico, working with our Mexican counterparts, identified, taking them down. And that’s hundreds of tons of methamphetamine that’s destined for the United Sates. Now, methamphetamine is not necessarily a — doesn’t necessarily have a market here in New york city. We do seize it from time to time. But it certainly is a market throughout middle America. No question about that. Jersey does have a market for methamphetamine, and so does pockets throughout Pennsylvania. Northern New York does have a meth market as well. But that trend that we’re talking about is headed in that direction.

**NUNYO**: Ok, and what about the counterfeit prescriptions being laced with fentanyl? How long has that being going on, specifically the counterfeit prescriptions. I’m curious because I think… That’s how Prince died. I think he took a fake Vicodin, and he thought it was a real Vicodin; and the authorities said they didn’t think that he knew that it was fentanyl. So talk about that.

**RAY**: So what you’re talking about, it circles back to what we just said about the dark web space. So a lot more of the criminal networks in the dark web space initially were really purchasing, or getting their hands on diverted pharmaceuticals such as Oxycontin. From there is when they started — we started seeing these same organizations getting their hands on Fentanyl; and putting them in, or transforming them — changing them into pill form; and selling them as if they were Oxycodone 30s to the same individuals. And so that convergence really took place alongside the technology, and towards these criminal groups going on to the dark web space to do that. So today, we see a lot more organizations that sell fentanyl in pill form. So that pharmaceutical black market, and that illicit narcotics markets have converged in some places throughout the United States. Certainly in the Northeast.

**NUNYO**: When users buy — get those counterfeit pills, don’t they know that there’s a good chance, there’s fentanyl in it?

**RAY**: No, not really. They think, “Okay, well it’s pills. It looks — in some instances, it looks just like an Oxycodone 30 would be. I mean the color, the stamp — everything that you would imagine it would look like, it looks just like a pill. And so they’re taking it, thinking that it is from a pharmaceutical company — not knowing that it is an illicit market or a network that had pressed that into a pill form, added the dye to it, and is selling it umm in the dark web space. Again, there’s no quality control. There’s no chemist that’s saying, “Hey this is this much fentanyl in this pill.”And so that’s where the overdoses are coming from.

**NUNYO**: Okay, and then an opioid that’s more powerful than even fentanyl, which is — I heard was used an elephant tranquilizer: carfentanil. And now, drug dealers are lacing drugs with that. That’s just — Talk about that.

**RAY**: Sure. Well, if you’re talking about — Listen, in our laboratory, we seized over 50 fentanyl, fentanyl analogues, including carfentanil. I mean, it’s really: you change the molecular compound here or there, and it’s still fentanyl. It’s still part of that group of fentanyl. And so that’s what the Chinese were — the Chinese chemical companies were originally doing. We would regular a specific variation of fentanyl, and the Chinese would regulate it; and then the chemists would just change one compound. And it becomes a new version of fentanyl, or a fentanyl analogue. And so carfentanil, yes, an elephant tranquilizer. We were seeing that throughout the United States. We don’t see it to the degree that we once did. Again, that goes back to China regulating that version of fentanyl. Now, the hope is that by regulating all the fentanyl analogues by class, that it will change what’s going on across America. It is still too early to determine whether that’s going to have an effect or not.

**NUNYO**: Okay.

**RAY**: But yes we have seen very powerful fentanyl analogues across the United States.

**NUNYO**: And it’s the same thing? The users don’t know that they are getting an elephant tranquilizer in their…

**RAY**: Right, well, I mean think about it. You know, if you’re a user, you’re not testing it. You’re just looking to get high. And that’s what it is. And so if a drug dealer is — if other people have survived, and got through it, they want a taste of it, too. And the more powerful, the more sustainable the high is, the more they’re going to be attracted to it.

**NUNYO**: Okay. How did the Mexican cartels respond to the legalization of marijuana in seven state in America. Obviously that’s not good news. How did they respond to less demand of their marijuana?

**RAY**: That’s not necessarily true. When you talk about less demand of their marijuana.

**NUNYO**: Oh, Okay.

**RAY**:There is no less demand of their marijuana. Each week I read intelligence reports that come across my desk. And marijuana seizures are still happening — they’re still happening by hundreds and thousands of pounds all the time. All across our southwest border. It hasn’t slowed down the Mexican cartels from pushing marijuana to the United States. Not one bit.

**NUNYO**: Wow. That’s interesting.

**RAY**: In fact, the black market is still, you know, all throughout the United States of Mexican marijuana.

**NUNYO**: Hmm. That’s interesting because I thought the assumption for the legalization of marijuana would make it less of a demand from — why would seek illegal marijuana if you could just buy it here. That’s —

**RAY**: Well, that’s just — that’s just not factual. Mexican cartels still grow marijuana. Still smuggle it across the border. And still are, you know, feeding that black market, even behind the state legalization programs.

**NUNYO**: Okay.

**RAY**: All throughout the United States.

**NUNYO**. And, and how, how has the DEA adjusted to — I’m assuming it adds a complexity because now, you know, this drug use to be illegal across the board. Now, it’s legal in seven states and possibly growing. So how do you guys adjust to that? How do you —

**RAY**: You have to understand how the DEA operates, right? So our priority right now, no question about it is: opioids. The opioid crisis. What’s going on across America because simply that’s what is killing people. So we put a lot of resources there but Mexican organizations are poly drug. In other words, they’re not just moving heroin or fentanyl or cocaine or meth. They’re also moving meth — umm, marijuana as well. So all different drugs. The Sinaloa cartel is engaged in all different drugs. So when the DEA is pursuing these organizations, we’re pursuing them as that. It’s really a national security issue for us. You have these foreign organizations that have infiltrated the U.S. by way of the drug trade. And so when we go after ‘em, we’re going after ‘em for you name it: cocaine, marijuana, heroin, fentanyl — whatever they’re engaged in. And so the strategy really has not changed as far as: ‘Hey, marijuana, legalization throughout the states is going to change how DEA operates because that’s not what it’s… The Mexican cartels haven’t changed. They continue to grow. They continue to smuggle across the border. In many cases, they are feeding that blackmarket demand in places like Colorado. So let’s say in terms of this conversation: Legal state marijuana is going through the front door, and behind it, the black market marijuana comes in. And so we see it all the time.

**NUNYO**: Okay. Americans spend an estimate of over $100 billion a year in illegal drugs. That’s by far more than any other country. China, you know — Chinese citizens for some reason, they don’t go crazy about the fentanyl in their backyard. So it seems like in a lot of ways, the root cause of, of, is the demand. So what, what does the DEA. I think the DEA is known more for, you know, combat, at least publicly, the supply. What do you guys do about trying to decrease the demand of drugs.

38:16 **RAY**: So the first thing, I’d say, Nunyo, is DEA is a law enforcement organization. So that’s that’s the first thing you need to recognize. There are other agencies throughout the United States that are more towards the demand reduction. We certainly participate. We certainly believe in treatment, prevention, education. I think it’s important that we collaborate throughout the United States, not only federally but throughout the state and local agencies as well to bring down the demand for drugs. That is important. But it’s like burning a candle at just one end. You have to burn the candle on both ends. So you have to — you can’t just go and just treat, treat, treat or educate and expect that demand’s going to drop. You have to pursue these organizations that are also shipping tons and tons of illicit narcotics into our country, trying to get the population addicted to make money. And so I think that really the solution is to attack it at both sides, and work with not only federal agencies but private sector, to do that.

**NUNYO**: Do you guys have a specific plan? What -

39:20 **RAY**: So we do. We have what’s known as DEA 360, that is in several cities throughout the United States, which is working with the local community, education, health agencies to first make the, the citizens, or make the Americans aware of what’s going on in their communities but also come in with law enforcement enforcement operation to pursue some of the biggest organizations that are affecting that particular city. And so, it goes back to what I said: It’s really burning the candle at both ends. Trying to pursue, yes supply, as well as the demand. But even when you talk about supply, for many, many decades, the DEA has been pursuing that are upfront and in our face; meaning the Colombian cartels, the Mexican cartels. But if you think about drugs, and what’s going on: who’s really behind a lot of that are Chinese organized crime as well. And so, today, we see Chinese groups that are [have], worked, or have linked up directly with Mexican organizations — to move fentanyl; to bring in precursor chemicals for meth production such methylamine, monomethylamine, pseudoephedrine. And they’ve been there for many, many decades. But they operate differently. And so we believe that, ‘Okay, if you work closer with China, case in point with fentanyl, and we try to classify some of these illicit narcotics, it will certainly change how drugs come into Mexico, or the Western Hemisphere, and then change how it comes into the United States. So I think you can’t just be one dimensional. You have to come at it from a symmetric solution.

**NUNYO**: Right. What’s your response, and it seems like this is increasingly the public sentiment. But what’s your response to when you hear a remark like: “The war on drug is a failure.” You know. I’m sure that frustrates you. [laughs]. So what do you respond when you hear that — when people say that; and they point out the incarceration, the corruption, and they say, you know, “The crime just goes on. Why don’t we just” — you know, so what’s your response to that?

**RAY**: So the response is: You know, you talk about the war on drugs. It was a political campaign from 1971. And so, I don’t know of any DEA agents that talk about the — a war on drugs. What we do is we protect the United States, really from foreign hostile criminal organizations that are trying to sell illicit narcotics, and that are killing off our citizens. And so when you think of what our day-to-day job is, it really comes down to saving lives. And it’s a federal crime. And it’s a federal crime for a reason. So you already spoke about the numbers of people that are dying. More people are dying each from overdoses than from car wrecks, from gun shots. And so, what are we supposed to do? Well, we’re supposed to pursue these organizations. The other thing I’d say about — as far as the drug war: **t**he DEA has less than 1% arrests are related to marijuana. And even then, they are poly groups. So we certainly don’t believe in: “Let’s arrest the user population.” That’s not where we invest our time and resources.A lot of our resources go towards these international groups that affect America.

**NUNYO**: Okay, let’s talk about little bit more about the Sinaloa cartel. Ismael Zambada a.k.a El Mayo. His name kept coming up during the trial. He was El Chapo’s most trusted ally for I think, you know, decades. And they worked hand in hand. So what’s the main difference between El Mayo and El Chapo.

**RAY**: See, when you talk El Chapo and El Mayo, you’re talking about many different things, right? Yes, they were partners in many instances in bringing narcotics into the United States. But they also have their own organization. Mayo is a founding father of the Sinaloa cartel. He’s been around just as long if not longer than Chapo was. But the DEA does pursue Mayo to the degree that we can. And there’s no question about it. We have worked time and time with the Mexican government to pursue him as well. In fact, when we were going after El Chapo in 2014, we were also going after Mayo.

**NUNYO:** Yeah, [laughs] I was actually going to ask you about that. I think it was 2014. You guys surveilled a ranch in Mexico, and then — with the Mexican marines. And then when they, you know, kind of went in there, he kind of like disappeared. So it’s like, this guy. How has he been able — He’s been — How’s he been able to avoid jail for 30 years being a prominent drug trafficker?

**RAY**: Well, let me say this: When we were pursuing El Mayo, El Mayo was smart enough to know to run. [NUNYO laughs] Simple as that. He was smart enough to know. He had people all throughout the city of Culiacan looking out for him. And as soon as he got word that things were happening, and the military was moving into Culiacan, he ran for the hills. And he knew to do that. Chapo didn’t. He stayed put. And Chapo did it because he was confident in his system that he built of tunnels, escapes. And because of that, you know, we almost caught him very early on in the pursue for Chapo. Whereas, Mayo ran up to the mountains, which makes it a little bit more challenging for the Mexican marines to pursue him. And that was the difference. But make no mistake about it. Mayo is on the radar. He is certainly a wanted man as well. No doubt about it. And so he’s managed to escape, but you gotta understand how we did the operation and how we put it together to go after El Chapo. It really was the first of its kind. It really was a model that we established of sharing information throughout all the U.S. agencies as well as Mexican agencies. It was really collaborative. It hasn’t happened like that — prior to that. There’s been instances and success here and there but not to the level certainly where you 22 different agencies sharing information for a common goal.

**NUNYO**: With El Chapo in jail, prosecutors said that two of his oldest sons: Ivan Guzman and Jesus Guzman obtained much of his power. And I saw [that] the DEA placed Jesus Guzman on its most wanted list with a $5 million reward. Does that designation and of reflect his stature in the Sinaloa cartel.

**RAY**: Well, I think it does, right? Because he is, he’s — the boys have risen. The Chapitos. There’s no question about it. They’ve risen through the ranks because Chapo is no longer there. So they’re coming down on his interests as well as Chapo’s brother and other members of his side of the Sinaloa cartel. But certainly Ivan and Jesus have stepped up.

**NUNYO**: During the trial, I found it fascinating that Vicente Zambada, El Mayo’s son, gave so much damaging testimony against El Chapo. And then also, El Mayo’s brother, who was a long-time accountant, gave damaging testimony against El Chapo. So doesn’t that negatively, permanently affect the relationship between El Mayo and El Chapo’s family?

**RAY**. You know, it’s interesting. I mean does it? Perhaps, or maybe not, right. Because when it’s all said and done, Vicente and Rey Zambada, they were arrested — They were apprehended, arrested and extradited. So when it’s all said and done: did Chapo expect them to keep their mouth quiet? And for what purpose? At that point, it’s kind of like understood that they’re in U.S. custody. They’re going to cooperate. It’s one of the interesting things that I found at the trial was really: the defense. The wasn’t —There really was not much of a defense whatsoever. It was a mountain of evidence. And from a historical perspective, you had Rey Zambada really painting a picture of everything that really — what the Sinaloa cartel was built on, going back decades and decades. And then Vicente bringing it up to current times. It was very damaging. But I don’t think the boys could really hold anything against Mayo Zambada for what his brother and his son has done. For what — to what end? For what purpose? You see what I’m saying? I mean, they still live — they’re all in Culiacan. They’re still part of the similar group. They still work together to this day.

**NUNYO**: Right. And that’s why I was surprised that they still actually work together because it’s the son and his brother testifying against, you know, their dad.

**RAY**: No. It still goes back to. It still goes back — You gotta understand that culture first of all. It still goes back to: This was part of the risk. This was part of the game. This was part of, of, you know, of, of: What they knew they were involved in. And so it’s no different. Do I think Chapo was was kind of shocked to hear, Rey Zambada speak to — in-depth, everything that he knew? Perhaps. But the reality, it shouldn’t have shocked him too much. He knew what was going on. He was there.

**NUNYO**: Right, right, right. And what about the jockeying for power because I know after El Chapo got arrested, I believe there was an assassination attempt with a couple of his brothers [sons], and then they got kidnapped later on under mystery circumstances and then released; and then some armed men invaded El Chapo’s hometown, ransacked his mother’s mansion and killed some neighbors. So is that situation fluid? Or what’s going on there?

**RAY**: So you’re talking about several different things there— right? —within that question. As soon as Chapo was extradited out of the country, it changes things in the Sinaloa, right? So the boys stepped up.There were — There certainly was infighting. There’s no doubt about it. But it settled down. And the boys. When I say the boys, Chapitos, Chapo’s sons, in Guadalajara. They were released because of Mayo. And so when you think about how does that come about, that’s that long term Sinaloa relationship that goes back many, many decades.”

**NUNYO**: Wow. Okay, So Mayo actually played a role in their release.

**RAY**: Well, certainly.

**NUNYO**: Wow.

**RAY**: But there’s two major cartels in Mexico. One is the Sinaloa cartel. The other is cartel New Generation based on Guadalajara, Jalisco. And that’s Nemesio Cervantes. El Mencho.

**NUNYO**: And that was actually my next question. [Laughs]

**RAY:** Right. And and and but, you know, most people don’t know this: There are many different cartels, right? There’s many different cartels. There’s literally, you know, thousands of gangs that are — fall underneath their cartel’s umbrella. But there’s only a certain amount of real bosses: heads of these organizations in Mexico. And they all know each other. And to a degree, they’ve all worked with each other at one point or another. And it comes down to the routes into the United States. When people talk about a drug war, the real war on drugs is amongst the cartels for the routes into the United Sates.That’s what that is. No question about it. It’s so lucrative for them. And that’s where — that’s where the fight really is.

**NUNYO**: Okay, so the Jalisco New Generation cartel, I think it was founded in — around 2010 by Nemesio Cervantes nicknamed El Mencho. Some pundits have said that they are are - have — are threatening the power of the Sinaloa. Is that accurate?

**RAY**: Yes.

**NUNYO**: Wow.

**RAY**: Yes. And the reason why is because they’re very organized. They’ve expanded into over 20 states throughout Mexico, and they have a global footprint. And so what I mean by that is: CJNG — New Generation — controls many of the ports, the sea ports. And so with that means they were able to expand their global footprint throughout the world. As far as Methamphetamine and cocaine that would come up to that organization. They also started taking more and more control of Guerrero. Or the organizations that are producing the organization that are producing heroin down in the state of Guerrero. Also, Baja California. which is the main port of entry into the United States from just Tijuana and San Diego. And so we see now, CJNG and Sinaloa really controlling Baja, California. They have moved there. They have stepped up. I’m talking about CJNG.

**NUNYO**: Right.

**RAY**: While the vast majority of markets in the United States are still controlled by Sinaloans, we do see the CJNG is certainly making headway throughout the U.S. but globally. While the Sinaloa cartel is concentrated on the U.S., CJNG we saw cocaine from them in places like Australia, in places like Spain and Dutch Netherlands, in the UK in China and Canada. They really expanded their global footprint. And they’re very well organized. And so that’s the other thing that differentiates them.

**NUNYO**: And they used to be, I believe, an armed wing of the Sinaloa cartel. Have they decided to kind of co-exist, or are they mortal enemies that are gonna just fight each other until one dominates?

**RAY**: No, they’re really; they’re really — it all depends, right? And so if — right now, they’re kind of — they’re working in some instances, jointly. And others, no. It all depends on the plaza, and who controls the plaza; and if there’s a change. Right now, they are co-existing. When we see a lot of the other kind— violence with issues that take place, as they expand south into Guerrero, there are many different organizations in the state of Guerrero that are remnants from other organizations like La Familia, Guerreros Unidos, and other organizations. It’s a fertile area for poppy cultivation. It’s one of those states that the Mexican government is very concerned with: Guerrero. But we now, more and more see CJNG taking over of that — controlling a lot more of the drugs coming out of Guerrero, and being pushed into the United States.

**NUNYO**: It’s well-known that El Chapo is “shorty,” but what I’m just curious: What does El Mencho mean in English. Is there — I have no idea.

**RAY**: Yes, it’s just his nickname.

**NUNYO**: Yeah, I’ve never — I was like: Does it mean menace? Or you know. I was just —

**RAY**: You got me, Nunyo.

**NUNYO**: That’s just. That’s funny. So when you joined the hunt for El Chapo in 2012, he’d been on the run for, you know, almost a decade. Just talk about how you got up to speed before you could oversee such a complex operation.

**RAY**: Sure, so I spent 15 years in the New York Drug Enforcement Task Force. And here in New York, the Sinaloa cartel had the vast majority of distribution networks here in the city. So for many many years, as we conducted, or I conducted my investigations within my group, we would get connections back to Sinaloa. So when you talk about me arriving down in special operations division in 2012, I already knew about El Chapo. I already new about his global reach. I already knew many of the individuals that were around him. And your’e talking about many, many years of conducting investigations that have led to that point. In 2012, I knew what needed to happen because I didn’t have — it wasn’t like I had all the answers or you know, I would be able to solve this problem. But I know [knew?] that we needed a coalition of people — like-minded people that were willing to share information and pursue El Chapo collectively. And that was my goal when I got there — was to do — try to build that, build that network of law enforcement agencies, not only, you know, here in the United States, but also Mexico.

**NUNYO**: Okay. It sounds like after a while, you got obsessed trying to recapture him. So I’m sure you can give me like one humorous story relating to maybe your wife: “Like dude, lets, you know…[Loughs]

**RAY**: Oh yeah.

**NUNYO**: How did it affect your personal life? Just —

**RAY**: Well, I’m the type of person anyway. For me personally, if — you know — the best way to describe me as an investigator is: I, for me, being an agent was never a job. It *is* my passion. This is like a hobby to me. Investigating is something that that I enjoy. And when it came down to going after El Chapo, the first thing I would tell you [is] this: It wasn’t just me that was focused in on this. You had a group. it was a core group of people that were really instrumental, and putting in things together. And there were many layers of this group that grew out to literally hundreds of people that participated. And so when you talk about: how did this come about? Yeah, I think that we all were obsessed. We all said — and as time went on, we got more and more obsessed with it. Me in particular. I remember when I first got to SOD [special ops division], I pulled every report I could get my hands on that connected to Chapo. And I read — I just read, read the volumes of different reports on Chapo — just to try to take in all the information that I wasn’t aware of. Because in New York as an agent you’re focused in on what’s going on here in the city. Right? So you’re focused in: Hey, this crew here, that crew there: all throughout the city. Yes, you tie it back to Arizona, and California and back to into Mexico. But you’re not so much focused on it as much. But now, leaving New York, and going to our special ops division allowed me to focus in more on Mexico, and who’s doing what. Who are the logistics people? Who are the pilots. Who are the smugglers. Who are the growers? Who are all this huge network of people, and what their roles are. And try to paint that strategic picture.And you know, the one thing I’ll always say is: It certainly wasn’t me. It was a group. Yes, I was in this group of people that were sharing information. And willingly giving up ideas, and trying to expand on them and develop ‘em. And that’s really the win in the capture of Chapo — from how I see it. Prior to that, it just didn’t happen to the degree that it did.

**NUNYO**: What did your wife thinking about this obsession. That’s what I was waiting for. Poor wife.

**RAY**: Yeah, so my wife. But my wife is used to that to be honest with you.

**NUNYO**: Oh, okay. You’re a lucky man.

**RAY**: Yeah, so you know, my wife’s a saint — is probably the best way to put it.

**NUNYO**: That’s great.

**RAY**: Because she’s seen me obsess with investigation for, you know, over 20 years now.

**NUNYO**: Wow, wow.

**RAY**: Now, I will say this: There’s been no other case for me like the pursuit of El Chapo. So, you know, a funny story is this: After we caught El Chapo in 2014, and he escaped in July 2015, I remember this: my wife one morning just kept on nudging me to get up, and it was like 5:30 in the morning. I didn’t want to get up. She said. “Umm, El Chapo escaped.” And I thought I was dreaming, which is — I really thought it was a dream and I didn’t hear it. And she kept on hitting me, and telling me to get up. And —

**NUNYO**: How — How did she know?

**RAY**: She knew because my phone was going off. It kept on vibrating. And also, something came on on the news or the radio. She heard it. And so she woke me up to tell me, And I was just. You know, I thought I was dreaming. So I went from deep sleep to like, you know, I’m awake. And now it’s kind of like reality set in: El Chapo escaped out of prison after we put so much effort towards apprehending him prior to that.

**NUNYO**: Right. And the way he escaped was just, you know, on one hand, it’s from a James Bond movie: a tunnel connected to his cell. And that was ingenious and brilliant. But on the other hand, it was almost comical, ‘cause they said the two guards who were supposed to be watching the surveillance were playing solitaire. And, you know, inmates complained complained about loud digging, and they were ignored. And then El Chapo said, you know, after he was captured: they actually went — his diggers actually went to the wrong cell first, and then had to adjust. So how deflating was that, you know, finding out and then hearing the details, knowing that this guy had help inside. How deflating was that?

RAY: So, you know, you gotta think about — so that was July 11, 2015 when he escaped, right. Keep in mind. 2012. September, 2012 is when we’re starting to put this team together to pursue El Mayo and El Chapo. And so, we capture him — the Mexican marines capture him in 2014. And so when he escaped, it was surreal. It was kind of like: It *was* deflating. It was — We were at a lost because, you know, we remember what it was like when we captured him. You go from this high to this is — you’re on top of the world — to like, “Oh, This guy actually walked out of a maximum security prison outside of Mexico City. And he built a mile-long tunnel to do it. Which — just think about the engineering feat that was just to do that. But quickly happened, right. So I think about within three days of the escape is when we kind of all said: “We’re not going to leave this. This is not the end of this story.” And so, I remember getting the team back together in special op division, and bringing in some of the key stakeholders and people that really dedicated their lives to capturing him the first time, and getting us in the room again to figure out: “Well, what’s the game plan to pursue him again?” So, you know, we were depressed for a few days, but we don’t stay there. We certainly didn’t stay down. The other thing we knew based on the first capture was: We learned a lot. We learned, you know, how he operated, who he was? Who was around him? Why he did certain things. We really learned a lot of his behaviors. His pattern of life if you will. And so in doing so, we felt confident that we could get back there.

NUNYO: One tantalizing piece of information that came out during the trial was that he actually plotted to be transferred back to Altiplano, which had escaped from. And he had bribed a national jail official in Mexico — he had paid a $2 million bribe. But then he was suddenly moved from Altiplano, this maximum, you know, security jail to Ciudad, across from I think the border of El Paso at the last-minute. Now, I wanted to know: did you guys have much to do with that because it seemed like the Mexican government was on to the fact that he might be actually trying to escape a third time. So what happened there?

**RAY**: See, that particular incident — What happened there — that was all Mexico. That was all the Mexican government that said, “You know, he already escaped twice, right?” So it was — there was no way they were going to let him escape again. And that was really a push from the Mexican government themselves. It wasn’t DEA. Did we have concerns? Yes. We did have concerns.

**NUNYO**: Because it was odd that they’re moving him from a maximum-security jail to, you know, a less — so it just shows you the level of corruption. And, I still want you to tell me: like did you feel like you were — after he escaped the second time, did you feel like you were also fighting institutional powers. What was gong through your head, knowing that he had inside help, and not just a couple guy at the bottom. Inside help at the highest levels.

**RAY**: Welp, You know, the funny thing is: When he was placed in Altiplano, we didn’t think — we really didn’t consider the fact that he could possibly escape from there. We’re thinking: “Oh, this is the securest prison that the Mexican government has. There’s no way he’s going to get out of that. We really didn’t think about that. After he escaped, everything changed, right? He escaped. We caught him. Once we got him back, everyone was very aware that this guy could attempt to do it again. And like I said the push did not come from DEA. The push came from within the Mexican government. Now, I can’t tell you — I just don’t know the answers of why they moved him from Mexico City up toward Ciudad Juarez. I don’t know that particular reason. I can’t give you that answer — If I had it, i’d be able to tell you. It could possibly — you’re taking him out of his territory that he controls; take him out of his element, and putting him in a place where he has very little control.

**NUNYO**: Right. It was just ironic because they said it’s less secure than Altiplano is like their top. So that’s what I found interesting. Now, you know, the hunt for El Chapo has been described as like a model for interagency cooperation. And you kind of touched on that before: The FBI, the DEA, Homeland Security, etc. Usually, there’s institutional barriers involving turf and credit. So what was different this time. How were all the agencies to able to finally like work together?

**RAY**: I think what happened was: the goal was so far-reaching. If you think about, right? Okay. We’re going to go pursue, you know — When we’re going after El Chapo, we weren’t only going after El Chapo. We were literally going after El Mayo; we were going after Rafael Caro-Quintero. Whoever we can find, we were going to grab, but we were looking for the head of the Sinaloa cartel. And so that’s so far out there, that I think the various agents and agencies said, “Okay, yeah, we’ll give it a shot.” And so at first, it’s kind of like, “Okay great, we’re going to put together another task force to pursue the heads of the Sinaloa cartel. We’ll see where it goes.” I think the difference this time around was we actually shared all our information. So if you think about how an investigation comes about: How you develop an investigation, it’s almost like a puzzle, right? You have — DEA has a piece; HSI, FBI has a piece, you know, Marshals have a piece; Marines have a piece; PGR. All these different pieces, that when you start putting these pieces together and sharing the information, you start seeing the picture. And the picture is really the who’s who that are around him in his organization. Who does what? It goes back to what I said about: who’s the logistics person? Who’s his bodyguard? Who’s his secretary? Who’s his cook? Who’s the guy that does errands? Who safeguards the warehouse? So all this — all this information now is starting to come into sight as we’re sharing information.

**NUNYO**: Okay, talk really quickly about the role of the Mexican — the Mexican marines, you know. They’ve been described as secretive and incorruptible. And they’ve been compared to the Navy SEALs, who they train with on occasion. They essentially caught El Chapo — or played a key role both times, right? So just talk about the importance of their role.

**RAY**: So the Mexican marines, certainly we consider them national heroes for Mexico. They are — yes, they have put their lives on the line time and time again. Certainly leadership of the marines that pursued El Chapo. The first time around, when we caught El Chapo, it was very much a joint venture. Okay? The second time in Los Mochis, the marines took more of a lead on that. And when I say, “more of a lead,” they were very instrumental, very, very focused — even more so than all of us. They were determined. They came up with a strategy that was absolutely brilliant. They flushed out Chapo. They forced Chapo from the mountains of Durango in Sinaloa to run down to Los Mochis; and it was the Marines that did that. It was their idea to flush him out. They knew where he was going to be. And they — there’s no way that the DEA, FBI, HSI, all the agencies — the Marshals that were there. TBP [the Border Patrol] — that we would have caught El Chapo if it wasn’t for the marines, and their commitment, dedication and and and really undying pursuit. They did not quit. They were tenacious from their very beginning, and once they committed, they were all in.

**NUNYO**: What was the reaction — I believe you were in the DC area when he was caught, talk about the moment he was caught. When you found out and your people found out. How did it feel?

**RAY**: The second time, you’re taking about.

**NUNYO**: Right, right. The second time. January 2016.

**RAY**: January 2016. When the — First of all, let me say this to you: After Chapo escaped in July of 2015, it took us about three weeks to zero back in on him. So we got that that —when I say we, you know, we: all those different agencies. We got pretty good at zeroing in on him at that point. Capturing him was the next big thing. We knew where he was, where he was going to go. So we knew he was going to drop down to Los Mochis, Mexico because we already knew. We already had the location. And the marines were watching it for two months. Waiting for him to come down. And so what we didn’t know was that there was going to be another escape hatch, right? Right? And so — well, let me say this: We did know there was going to be another escape hatch. What we didn’t know was that the tunnel — that, where the exit was for the escape route from this safe house of his was going to be flooded with water and sewage. And so the marines, already knew about the escape. They knew about the sewage system. But when they did the counter surveillance on that particular tunnel, it was dry. And so when Chapo and Cholo Ivan came out of the — they went into the sewage, and it was flooded. So the marines couldn’t get down there. So that was still close. Even at that point, Chapo almost escaped.

**NUNYO**: Right, right.

**RAY**: He was very very close to him getting out.

**NUNYO**: Yeah, and you know. Two things I found interesting. One was funny. They carjacked — him and his assassin, Cholo, carjacked, I think a Volkswagen, and it — the transmission like blew, and it fills with smoke. If that doesn’t happen, is there a chance that these guys get away?

**RAY**: Sure, sure, sure. That was — Well, the Mexican marines really had Los Mochis surrounded. So could have — it all depends is probably the best answer. It didn’t happen. Could he have gotten away? Yes, if the car — if they got into the car; they carjacked the car, and it worked fine; and they were able to take off and go from there, we wouldn’t have had them.

**NUNYO**: And then the other thing I found interesting that — there was a huge firefight between the Marines and El Chapo’s men preceding the carjackings. And five of El Chapo’s men died. El Chapo and his assassin didn’t fire a shot. Didn’t that surprise you?

**RAY**: No, it didn’t because the whole point of them engaging in the free fight was to give Chapo time to escape. These people are life-long security people for he Sinaloa cartel. So they —

**NUNYO**: No, I’m not talking about that. I’m talking about that. I’m talking about El Chapo and his assassin not not giving up [ck?] — no resistance.

**RAY**: They gotta move. And so if you think about them, okay, the Marines hit the door, you know the marines hit the door. Or hit the front door to the safe house. As soon as that happened, El Chapo’s goal is not to fight them. His goal is to escape. He knows that his hideout has been located, and they’re pursuing him. And so the security detail for Chapo engaged in the firefight, and gave him enough time to actually make it outside of the sewage system. So it didn’t surprise me one bit. I can tell you this, though. The capture of Cholo Ivan was a big win for the Marines. Because he’s such a well-known assassin in the state of Sinaloa that they din’t expect him to be there.

**NUNYO**: Where’s he now?

**RAY**: He’s still in prison down there.

**NUNYO**: In Altiplano?

**RAY**: I don’t know if he’s in Altiplano or not.

**NUNYO**: I gotcha. And then so while on the run, El Chapo granted an interview to Sean Penn for Rolling Stones after a secret meeting was arranged by the Mexican soap actress Kate Del Castillo. And then the Mexico’s attorney’s general, said that that was a factor; and then Sean Penn took offense to that, and he expressed fear of his life. What’s your take on all that?

**RAY**: So is — this all happened in September, October 2015. And so my take on that is we already knew where Chapo was. The only thing that happened when Sean Penn and Kate del Castillo showed up was: We knew El Chapo would leave the ranch where he was located at to go see them. He wasn’t going to expose his hideout to anybody outside of the — his cartel. And so it changed what we wanted to do, but not by much. So, you know, we waited for him to go back to the ranch, and then we went to pursue him.

1:16:32NUNYO: I thought there was a parallel between El Chapo and this heroin dealer from the late 70s named Nicky Barnes, a.k.a. Mr. Untouchable because in 1977, he did — gave a cover story to New York Times Magazine, where he posed for a cover. And then Jimmy Carter saw it, and he was enraged. Within three months, this guy was sentenced to life. And before that, he had beaten several charges; he’d gotten off. And thus, the nickname. So at some point, did El Chapo think he was untouchable?

**RAY**: I don’t know if he thought he was untouchable, but I do know that El Chapo wanted his story out there. So, you know, he — the whole point with Kate del Castillo and Sean Penn was to get his story out there. And so, you know, El Chapo thought he was bigger than Pablo Escobar. But to answer that question, we were already pursuing El Chapo. So even when Kate came into the picture, she didn’t come into the picture until after we had captured him the first time; and he was in prison. And then, she stared reaching out on Twitter, standing up for him, and saying all this stuff about him. But truth be told, we knew that El Chapo wanted to get his story out there. And quite frankly, it’s the reason why he took the case to trial. It’s the conclusion of his story, you know. He really had nothing to lose. But a mountain of evidence hanging over his head; and so, why not go to trial and then it’s the end of his, his story. really.

**NUNYO**: Yeah, he was - he’s pitching a movie. I mean, I would think somebody on the run would have much more to think about than trying to pitch a move. But —

**RAY**: You know, I’ll tell you something, Nunyo. Here’s what happened. I remember. We had Chapo. We had the ranch where he was, which was outside of Casa Lamm, Mexico. And three days prior to when we were thinking about launching on him, I’m sitting at my desk in the special ops division, and I see a picture of Kate del Castillo and I see two other individuals, and then finally I see a picture of Sean Penn, and they are all flying into Mexico City. And right off the bat, it’s kind of like, “Are they really going to meet with Chapo. So it was kind of a little surreal. But they did. The whole point was to get the story out there. And that’s what Kate was trying to tell Chapo: that she could be the vehicle to get his life story out to Hollywood if you will.

**NUNYO**: Why was his extradition to the United States so significant?

**RAY**: I think that it really — it’s a full circle thing in the sense that here is the biggest drug trafficker in the world, right? And the fact that we were able to work very closely with Mexico to capture him; work very closely with Mexico to extradite him and to prosecute him — it’s so significant because it shows a solution to the bigger problem. And it goes back to how we collaborate with Colombia, with extradition. It changed how the Columbians moved drugs throughout the world because we will extradite them to the United States, and in some instances, they’ll spend the rest of their life in jail. Well, it’s the same thing now with the sentencing of El Chapo. It shows that the rule of law *is* a solution. And really, working with Mexico to pursue these other high-level, you know — the one thing that these organizations, or these these kings, kingpins if you will don’t want is to come to the United States. They do not want to be in the U.S. judicial system. And that’s why when Chapo did come in, that was it. He recognized when we extradited hm into the United States, into Long Island, that that was the end.

**NUNYO**: Right. And, you know, when he got there, he looked he was in culture shock. And this is a man who’d bragged about killing 2,000 people roughly over his career as a drug trafficker. So it was kind of a bizarre scene. Surreal. What do you think was going through his mind?

**RAY**: I think it’s a combination of that. I also — I think it is the culmination of a life of violence, of evil, of doing all this stuff; and now it’s coming back right up in front in his face and it’s personal here in the United States. And it’s also a point where he recognizes, he no longer has control. The control of his world, his circle, is now gone in coming into the United States. And so that’s what — that’s what it was. It was a combination of things in my opinion.

**NUNYO**: So you were at Long Island McArthur Airport, right, when he go there? So just paint the picture. What was that like? The scene? The atmosphere? Who was there?

**RAY**: So when I got there, I got there at the tail end. He was already — I had come up from special ops division in Virginia. And I go [there] right at the tail end. But it was all the different agencies there to see this, this person that we, we pursued for many many years. It was — To me, also in law enforcement, it was satisfaction because here’s a guy that has caused all the harm — all these victims across the United States. To me, that’s the full circle as well. It’s kind of like: we got you. Now, you’re going to pay the price for everything that you’ve done to our country — not only the United States but to Mexico as well.

**NUNYO**: What surprised you the most from the trial because it seemed like even — there were moments even El Chapo seemed to gets information that surprised him. And you’ve been on the inside, and you know, the public was gripped because of all the, you know, dramatic and sensation information. What surprised you?

**RAY**: Okay, so what surprised me: a couple things. The first thing was: It’s the first time the public really saw firsthand information painting the scale and scope of the cartel over generations. It really laid out not in a movie or in a book, but in [the] real world how big and how powerful that cartel was, and had become; and all — and everything sometimes at the lowest level to the highest level of what that meant to build that criminal organization. I think that was the first thing that was really significant. The other thing was that — that stood out to me personally was that there was no — there was no defense. There wasn’t even really an attempt because how could you overcome —

**NUNYO**: Overwhelming evidence.

**RAY:** That’s right. You have a mountain of evidence. And here’s the other thing I’d say. That was only a tidbit.

**NUNYO**: Wow.

**RAY**: That was only a tidbit of the real mountain of evidence. There was no need for overkill from a prosecutorial perspective, standpoint because there was so much more. If we put all of — everything together, it would have taken, you know, double that time just to get through it. For what purpose? And so that’s — those are some of the other things that stood out to me.

**NUNYO**: One thing that jumped out at me, and I was surprised it didn’t get more coverage was, based on testimony, El Chapo’s connections to the DEA. And there were two former DEA agents who came out on record I think within a year ago saying that they secretly met with El Chapo when he was in prison in 1998 when he was incarcerated in Puente Grande, and he had requested a sit-down to try to either cut his sentence or avoid getting extradited to the United States. He was going to give information on a cartel rival who had tried to assassinate him. Nothing came out of it. However, soon after his legal adviser, somebody named Umberto Castro, became a DEA informant and eventually entered witness protection. So what can you say about this intriguing divide-and-conquer strategy that’s been used in the past. A DEA agent has been on record. That’s stunning.

**RAY**: When you say divide-and-conquer, you’re talking about from a Mexican cartel perspective, like —

**NUNYO**: Right, right: You’re getting information from one cartel to —

**RAY**: It is — It’s just. Has it happened where organizations give up information on other organizations. Of course. But is it — Are they doing it from: “Hey, I’m Ray Donovan, I have this…” — No. They won’t. They don’t do it like that. They’ll just put it out there, or have someone else put it out there. And truth be told, sometimes the information — there’s nothing behind it. So we got information from all different ways, all different methods. And if someone calls into the embassy in Mexico, and ays, “Hey, I have some intel, and it happens to be on a rival gang; or rival organization,” that doesn’t mean anything unless there’s some substance behind it.

**NUNYO**: So you guys, have or will work on a case-by-case basis depending on —

**RAY**: No, it’s not like we’re going to work with a criminal that’s that’s breaking the law. That’s not going to — The first thing that would happen to someone like a Chapo if he wanted to cooperate with us is he has to come to U.S. court, and he has to fall on the sword so to speak. Meaning, he has to confess to every crime that he’s ever committed. And then, we’d sit down with him. So you have to basically as a rule, come in and say, “Yeah, I did this, this, this, this over this period of time. And now I’m willing to cooperate.” We don’t take information from criminals — from active criminals that are still breaking — knowingly breaking the law. That doesn’t happen. But when I say — Okay well someone could call into any consular embassy, and give up information, well certainly they can. Anyone can. Do we know where it comes from? No. Do we know if it’s valid or not? No. Will we look into it? Probably.

**NUNYO**: Okay. Do you know how El Chapo found out that his IT guy was cooperating with the FBI? Because that was another pretty interesting situation. He’s I think a Columbia computer whiz and college dropout. He created the encryption communication system for El Chapo, and the FBI pressured him to give ‘em access. And then they said, when El Chapo found out, he ordered him assassinated, but his people didn’t know his last name. So I — it just sounded bizarre. So first of all, it’s like: How did El Chapo find out? And then how could they not — They said they researched him on social media, and they couldn’t find — figure out his last name. How does El Chapo not know this guy’s last name — it just sounds crazy.

**RAY**: Well, I mean it is crazy — it is crazy. But it’s also, you know, true. It doesn’t mean — they may want to investigate — Listen, Chapo did have his own way of investigating things. There’s no doubt about it. But it doesn’t mean that he was efficient in doing so, you know. The communication people — he had other communication people that were around him — that we knew about, that we also looked into. He did like trying to keep himself secure as far as technology goes. But it also led to his his, you know, him being captured.

 **NUNYO**: Right, right. And why didn’t the federal government consider trying to persuade El Chapo to cooperate, and reveal valuable information, especially institution support involving politicians and bankers. Because it would seem that would be most impactful way to bring down the cartel.

**RAY**: Cooperate for what benefit, Nunyo? Because if you’re talking about a man who was responsible for thousands of people dying. Do we really want to cooperate with this person?And, you know, it comes back to: There’s an issue there. There’s a big issue. This guy is so violent, caused so much mayhem and throughout the United States and Mexico, that you know there’s no need to cooperate with him. There’s really no need to sit down and hear what he has to say. I will say this though: Sitting in the trial, you got a gist — you got the gist of it. You saw the violence, you heard the violence, you know, the instances where he actually killed people himself. And so no — why do that?

**NUNYO**: You alluded to Rafael Caro-Quintero earlier. He’s the guy who played a role in Kiki Camarena’s — Enrique Kiki Camarena’s death. I think he served something like 28 years out of a 40-year sentence, and then got — left jail because of a technicality, and then went in hiding. And, I believe the DEA has — says he’s an active member of the Sinaloa cartel, and he’s on you guy’s wanted list. How much of that is because of what he did to Camarena and/versus him actually being an active member in his 60s after serving that long in jail.

**RAY**: Sure, so he is an active member in the Sinaloa cartel. He’s still into drug trafficking. And he happens to be the person responsible for the death of a DEA agent that [and] we will not stop pursuing him. He is publicly enemy # 1 for us.

**NUNYO**: Okay, and when you say, he’s active. He’s active as far as become one of the leaders, or is it hard to pinpoint his role?

**RAY**: As far as the leader, you know, that’s changed for him. He is able to traffic narcotics under the Sinaloa umbrella. Again. And he is.

**NUNYO**: I wanted to touch on first the money laundering. I saw that the HSBC — Europe’s biggest bank — paid a record fine almost $2 billion for laundering money, you know, tied to El Chapo but this end up being a fraction of the huge profits that they get boosted by drug money. Is there no appetite among authorities to jail bankers who enable money laundering?

**RAY**: Well, I think there is. It’s just. For us, if you think about what we’re doing in DEA and other agencies, you’re pursuing criminal charges for illicit drug trafficking — that’s really the beginning of that type of investigation. There’s the other side, which is the financial investigation. It’s a lot more methodic, and takes a lot longer to do. But as long as we can find the federal criminal charges, we will pursue them federally. And so we have pursued them federally. I think what’s happening as far as money laundering goes is: There’s a change in how money is being laundered throughout the world. I talked about it earlier. The Chinese gangs now have linked up with Mexican cartels to move billions of dollars through trade-based money laundering mechanisms. So in other words, historically if a load of heroin came up here to New York City from L.A., that same truck, it would come up here via tractor trailer. That same truck would receive money from the previous load to transport back to L.A., and be smuggled back to Mexico from San Diego peonies— those times have changed. Now, the money from the heroin and fentanyl hearing being moved is going into Chinese communities. And the Chinese money brokers are buying goods with that. And they are sending the goods back to Chinese companies in China are sending the money to Mexico to pay the cartels. So it’s a big circle of money laundering that’s taking place here in New York City.

**NUNYO**: Okay, And I’d like you to talk about the groundbreaking move by the DEA to arrest two executives from a top pharmaceutical company. You know, this went way behind the occasional million-dollar settlement. Talk about the significance of that development. You guys basically equated executives with drugs lords.

**RAY**: That’s right. Because — this is what we were saying with RDC, is that the executives there knowingly were breaking the law and putting people’s lives at stake. And so as you mentioned early on, the big pharmaceutical companies: manufacturers, distributers, pharmacies, pharmacists certainly played a role in overprescribing Oxycontin and opioids to the American public. And in this instance with RDC, we didn’t want to treat them any differently. We did not want to treat them any differently because you show up in a suit, or they are, you know, in [an] office because they’re still — they still put many people’s lives at stake. And they certainly played a role knowingly breaking the law on purpose.

**NUNYO**: Okay, well, I have taken up too much of your time. It was just such an informative conversation. And you gave a lot of insight. So appreciate it. The time went so fast. You enormous responsibilities to combat the opioid crisis — some of the most violent criminals in the world. But if El Chapo didn’t scare you, I don’t know who will. So the bad guys have their hands full but thanks a lot. I really appreciate your time. And I enjoyed meeting you. Appreciated.

**RAY**: Absolutely. The feeling is mutual. My pleasure, Nunyo. Thanks you very much for conducting the interview.

**NUNYO**: Alright, alright. Thanks — appreciate it.

**RAY:** Thank you.

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