

# *United States Attorney's Office*

## *Northern District of Iowa*



**United States Attorney Kevin W. Techau**

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### **PRESS RELEASE**

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Cedar Rapids, Iowa

### **SYNTHETIC DRUG SALES SEND A MOTHER AND HER SON TO FEDERAL PRISON**

A mother and her son who were convicted of selling synthetic cannabinoids (commonly known as “K2”) and synthetic cathinones (commonly known as “bath salts”) from two eastern Iowa businesses were sentenced today in federal court in Cedar Rapids to [several years in] federal prison.

“Synthetic drugs are illegal and present a grave danger to our community, particularly our children,” said United States Attorney Kevin Techau. “Iowans can be very proud of the hard work and cooperation by federal, state and local law enforcement that brought these important cases to a successful conclusion.”

“The manufacture, sale, and abuse of synthetic drugs represents a clear and detrimental danger to our society,” said Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) Resident Agent in Charge Scott Smith. “These substances serve no legitimate purpose other than to generate a powerful intoxication for the user while generating enormous illicit profits for the criminal organizations who pander them. These powerful chemicals are generally manufactured and produced in a foreign laboratory environment without safety protocols nor concerns for their potential negative effects which ultimately leaves the users at great risk of death.”

“It is DEA’s global footprint pledge, with the assistance of our law enforcement partners, to remain vigilant in our pursuit of identifying, investigating, arresting, and seizing any illicit assets from those criminal organizations who continue to circumvent the law by producing, transporting, and distributing synthetic drugs. Today’s announcement represents the culmination of months of teamwork between state, local, and federal partners. It should serve notice to any criminal organization operating with a nexus to Iowa that law enforcement will not obscurely stand in the shadows, but rather will utilize all available resources to bring them to justice and hold them accountable for their actions.”

## **The Ramos's Convictions and Sentences**

Mary Ann Ramos, age 53, from Evansdale, Iowa, received the prison term after a June 26, 2014, jury verdict finding her guilty of four counts: (1) distribution of the synthetic drug XLR-11; (2) distribution of the synthetic drug alpha-PVP; (3) possession with intent to distribute XLR-11; and (4) possession with intent to distribute alpha-PVP. The jury acquitted Mary Ramos of a charge of possessing a firearm in furtherance of a drug crime. Mary Ramos was sentenced by United States District Court Chief Judge Linda R. Reade to 60 months' imprisonment to be followed by a 3-year term of supervised release. She was also ordered to pay a special assessment of \$400.

Earl James Ramos, age 26, from Evansdale, Iowa, received the prison term after a June 13, 2014, guilty plea to one count of distributing the controlled substance analogue pentedrone. Earl Ramos was sentenced by Chief Judge Reade to 57 months' imprisonment to be followed by a 3-year term of supervised release. He was also ordered to pay a special assessment of \$100.

There is no parole in the federal system. Both Mary Ramos and Earl Ramos are being held in the United States Marshal's custody until they can be transported to federal prison.

## **The Dangers of Synthetic Drugs**

According to information disclosed at a January 23, 2015, sentencing hearing, synthetic drugs present a significant threat to public safety.

Synthetic cannabinoids are substances synthesized in laboratories that mimic the biological effects of THC, the main psychoactive ingredient in marijuana. These chemicals were initially used in the 1980s as research tools to develop novel therapies for various clinical conditions. Other synthetic cannabinoids were synthesized in the mid-1990s and studied to further advance the understanding of drug-receptor interactions regarding the cannabinoid system. Drug traffickers have diverted these research chemicals from their former, legitimate, use, for sale to users seeking to obtain a high. Adverse effects of synthetic cannabinoids on the human body include hallucinations, paranoia, tachycardia, and even death. Due to their sometimes professional-looking packaging, nominal ingredient lists, availability at otherwise-legitimate storefronts, and false marketing as a legal or safe form of marijuana, customers often incorrectly assume the synthetic cannabinoid products are legal or otherwise safe to consume. The drug traffickers frequently mislabel the packages of synthetic cannabinoids as "potpourri" or "incense" and incorrectly assume that marking the packages as "not for human consumption" provides a legal defense to criminal prosecution.

For the past several years, there has also been a growing use of, and interest in, synthetic cathinones sold under the guise of "bath salts" or "plant food." These

products are comprised of a class of dangerous substances perceived to mimic cocaine, LSD, MDMA, and/or methamphetamine. Users have reported impaired perception, reduced motor control, disorientation, extreme paranoia, and violent episodes. The long-term physical and psychological effects of use are unknown but potentially severe. The American Association of Poison Control Centers reported 2,656 calls related to synthetic cathinone (“bath salts”) exposures in 2012 and overdose deaths have been reported as well.

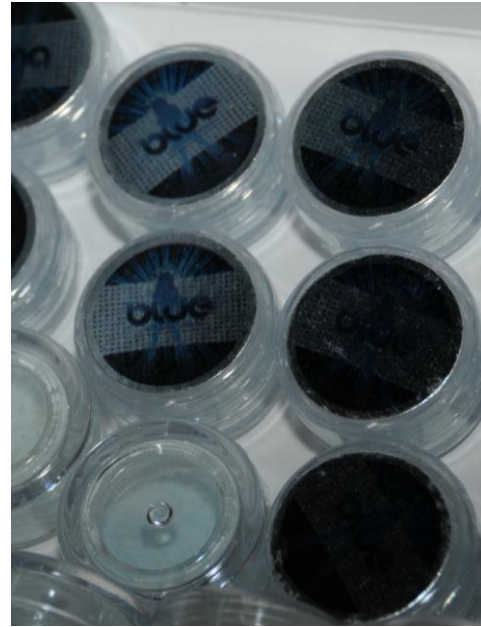
These products have become increasingly popular, particularly among teens and young adults and those who mistakenly believe they can bypass the drug testing protocols of employers and government agencies to protect public safety. They are sold at a variety of retail outlets, in head shops, and over the Internet. However, they have not been approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for human consumption or for medical use, and there is no oversight of the manufacturing process.

### **The Ramos’s Offenses of Conviction**

The evidence at Mary Ramos’ June 2014 trial showed that Mary Ramos sold a drug called XLR-11 under various brand names including “Mister Nice Guy,” “Mr. Happy,” “Diablo,” “Insane,” “Hydro,” “LOL,” and “777.” XLR-11 is a synthetic cannabinoid similar to THC, but the substances were labeled as incense or potpourri, and labeled as “not for human consumption.” Evidence at trial showed Ramos sold the XLR-11 products from a store where she worked in Cedar Rapids and offered smoking papers along with the XLR-11 products she sold to undercover officers. The evidence also showed Ramos charged about \$25 for a single package of purported “incense.”

Ramos also sold a drug called Alpha-PVP under the brand name “Blue.” Alpha-PVP is a form of synthetic cathinone, which is a stimulant similar to methamphetamine or cocaine. The “Blue” substance was falsely labeled as scouring powder, and sold by Ramos for \$50 per jar, despite the fact that Alpha-PVP has no cleaning properties. Each \$50 jar of “Blue” contained less than half a gram of powder. A witness at trial testified that using “Blue” was just like using methamphetamine.

At the time Ramos sold and possessed the Alpha-PVP, that substance was an illegal controlled substance analogue under federal law. The term “controlled substance analogue” refers to a substance that is chemically similar to, and has substantially similar or greater effects on humans than a substance in Schedule I or II of the Controlled Substances Act. Controlled substance analogues are illegal under federal law if intended for human consumption. The evidence at trial showed Ramos not only sold the synthetic drugs from a store where she worked in Cedar Rapids, but also sold the “bath salts” and “K2” from her car to a confidential informant during the nighttime.



(The above images depict packages of “Blue” possessed by Mary Ramos).

Earl James Ramos was convicted of distributing pentedrone, another synthetic “bath salt,” from a convenience store he managed in Waterloo. At the time he sold the pentedrone, it was an illegal controlled substance analogue under federal law.

Court documents reflect that Earl Ramos was the manager of the Five Star Snacks and I-Wireless store in Waterloo, Iowa. Beginning in at least 2012, Earl Ramos began selling synthetic drugs from the Five Star Snacks store and from other locations at the request of certain customers. Earl Ramos sold synthetic cannabinoid products with the brand names of “Mr. Nice Guy,” “KMA,” “LOL,” “Caution,” “California Dreams,” “Diablo,” “Hydro Kush,” “King Kong,” “Mr. Happy,” “Insane,” and “Hydro 777.” Earl Ramos sold synthetic cathinones under the brand names of “Diamond,” “White Angel,” “Pump It,” and “Blue.” The substance contained in the containers of “Diamond” and “Pump It” was pentedrone. The substances contained in the containers of “Blue” were Alpha-PVP. Earl Ramos’s store and home were searched in June 2013 and again in March 2014. During both searches, agents seized synthetic cannabinoids and synthetic cathinones, as well as firearms.

### **The Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force and Project Synergy**

The Ramos cases were investigated as part of the Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force (OCDETF) program of the United States Department of Justice through a cooperative effort of the DEA Task Force consisting of the DEA, the Linn County Sheriff’s Office, the Cedar Rapids Police Department, the Marion Police Department, the Iowa Division of Narcotics Enforcement, and the Sixth Judicial District Department of Correctional Services; the Tri-County Drug Enforcement

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Task Force; the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI); the Department of Homeland Security; the Internal Revenue Service (IRS); and the Iowa Division of Criminal Investigation, Intelligence Division.

Search warrants executed at the Ramos's homes and businesses in June 2013 were conducted as part of Project Synergy, a global takedown of synthetic drug manufacturers and distributors. In Project Synergy enforcement actions between December 2012 and June 2014, more than 227 arrests were made and 416 search warrants served in 35 states, 49 cities and five countries, along with more than \$51 million in cash and assets seized. Altogether, 9,445 kilograms of individually packaged, ready-to-sell synthetic drugs, 299 kilograms of cathinone drugs (the falsely labeled "bath salts"), 1,252 kilograms of cannabinoid drugs (used to make the so-called "fake pot" or herbal incense products), and 783 kilograms of treated plant material were seized. Project Synergy was coordinated by DEA's Special Operations Division, working with the DEA Office of Diversion Control, and included cases led by DEA, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), the FBI, and the IRS. In addition, law enforcement in Australia, Barbados, Panama, and Canada participated, as well as a multitude of state and local law enforcement members.

The Ramos cases were prosecuted by Assistant United States Attorney Dan Chatham.

Court file information is available at <https://ecf.iand.uscourts.gov/cgi-bin/login.pl>. The case file number for Mary Ramos is 13-CR-2034-LRR. The case file number for Earl Ramos is 14-CR-2014-LRR.

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