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North Phila. drug boss gets life term

Maurice Lewis had
pleaded guilty to
running a cocaine ring
at 8th and Allegheny.

By Joseph A. Slobodzian
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Ever working the angles, admitted North Philadelphia drug boss Maurice Lewis wrote a fellow inmate in May predicting, "I'll be home next year." And why not? Lewis ran his drug ring through trusted lieutenants while serving five years in state prison for drug-dealing in the early 1990s. He beat a murder charge in 1999, started a Northeast auto-parts business, and branched into hip-hop music as promoter "Mo Black." Throughout my life I've been forced to overcome situations such as this," Lewis wrote, seeking inside information from inmate Wayne Caldwell. "I escaped this same situation in '89, and I beat the death penalty, you know, I got the same things I had back then now." A versatile entrepreneur, Lewis might be. A judge of people, not. Caldwell, Lewis' pen

pal, was a veteran FBI informant, and Lewis' musings yesterday helped get him life in prison without parole.

Referring to Lewis' attempts to intimidate or harm government witnesses, U.S. District Judge Stewart Dalzell recommended that Lewis be sent to a maximum-security federal prison "far from Philadelphia. ... He represents a lethal danger to anyone whom he regards as getting in his way."

Dalzell also ordered Lewis to forfeit to the government assets of up to \$1.09 million that can be linked to drug profits.

Before sentencing, Lewis tried to persuade Dalzell to reconsider rulings on motions Lewis had filed without the knowledge of defense attorney Donald F. Manno.

"I've already denied those motions," Dalzell said. "Now I want to hear what you have to say."

"Then there's nothing left to say," Lewis replied. "My issues are with some of your rulings."

Lewis said nothing more, except to turn to weeping relatives as he was led away: "I'll call my momma later."

Lewis pleaded guilty on April 7

— the day his trial was to begin — on all counts of the two-year-old indictment charging him with conspiracy to distribute more than 11 pounds of cocaine, using juveniles in drug trafficking, and related drug and firearms charges.

The 19 people indicted with him had already pleaded guilty.

Lewis was charged with running a highly organized cocaine business that dominated the neighborhood at Eighth Street and Allegheny Avenue from 1989 to 1998. At its height, prosecutors estimated that Lewis' ring sold 22 pounds of cocaine powder a month and grossed \$40,000 to \$60,000 a day.

Manno tried to get Lewis a 30-year prison term, arguing that Lewis deserved credit for "acceptance of responsibility" under federal sentencing guidelines because he pleaded guilty.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Barbara J. Cohan said that Lewis tried to intimidate and threaten witnesses while in prison and that his letters to Caldwell proved he had no remorse.

One witness yesterday was Francisco Lopez, a North Philadelphia man who, along with his wife, Evelyn Torres, has already

been sentenced in the case.

Lopez said he and his wife let Lewis use his house on Eighth Street at Allegheny to store bulk quantities of cocaine. After the FBI and police raided the house on July 3, 1998, Lopez said, Lewis was angry and suspected — wrongly, at that time — that Lopez and Torres were cooperating with the FBI.

Lopez testified that Lewis lieutenant Ubaldo "Ubi" Lebron first told him Lewis would pay for their "vacation" in Puerto Rico, an offer he rejected.

Later in 1998, Lopez said, he and Torres were awakened one night by a noise and found an unexploded military fragmentation grenade on the living-room floor.

Lebron testified that he visited Lewis at a Philadelphia prison — Lewis was then awaiting trial for murder — and that Lewis was worried about Lopez and Torres and said "he wanted to get rid of Frank and Evelyn. ... I understood he wanted to get them killed."

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