

DRUG-MILL OPERATOR DESCRIBES AN EMPIRE BUILT ON FAT WOMEN

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Nellie Bell Kassim says she launched her prescription-drug empire in late 1979 with 17 overweight women whom she sent out to obtain prescriptions for stimulants.

In merely two years, **Kassim** testified in U.S. District Court Thursday, the empire had expanded to the point that a doctor who wanted to write phony prescriptions for her asked her, "How long will it take me to make a million dollars ?

Kassim , 42, of Detroit, who has pleaded guilty to a reduced conspiracy charge in exchange for her co-operation, gave her first full day of testimony Thursday in the four-week-old conspiracy trial of eight people who either worked in her six Detroit clinics or at pharmacies that filled prescriptions from the clinics.

WHILE WAGERING at Northville Downs four years ago, a friend told **Kassim** , who was a nurse, that he could introduce her to several doctors who would channel the stimulant Preludin to her to resell, she testified.

"I got two cars and 17 girls and put them on the street ," **Kassim** said, explaining that she paid each of the overweight women \$20 per prescription as well as \$30 that the women paid the doctors.

In addition, some pharmacies were paid as much as an additional \$30 because they were "hustling pharmacies . . . that knew what was going on."

At the end of each week, **Kassim** gathered about 1,000 pills from the women and shipped them by Greyhound bus to Washington , D.C., she said. She would fly to Washington to pick up the pills and then would sell them for \$5 to \$6 a pill to drug dealers with street names that included Baby Dee, Harry Hippy and Black Cat, **Kassim** testified.

IN MARCH 1980, such trade became "too hot," **Kassim** testified. So she brainstormed with Robert Cohn, a Detroit attorney who unsuccessfully defended **Kassim** on a welfare fraud charge in 1970, and came up with the idea of opening a diet clinic and hiring Dr. Alan Fields to write prescriptions, **Kassim** testified.

Fields has pleaded guilty to conspiracy. Cohn, whom **Kassim** described as "my supposed lover for 10 years," has not been indicted, and the government will not disclose whether he will be a witness.

Kassim said she and Cohn split the profits at six Detroit clinics they opened, then closed one after another in 1980 and 1981. Fields was paid \$700 daily in cash "to write prescriptions all day and half the night," **Kassim** said.

Kassim said the first clinic at 3800 Woodward attracted 30 customers on its first day and about 50 on the second day, a Friday.

"Then I flew to New York, and I didn't get back (to the clinic) until late Monday and I thought it was a food stamp line," **Kassim** said. "There must have been 250 people lined up on the street. They had it roped off."

BECAUSE OF "too much traffic," **Kassim** and Cohn switched clinics and expanded their payroll of employees, a bizarre group that eventually was to include four transvestites, a forger and a purported lab technician who "was terrible," **Kassim** said. "A lady came out with a needle hanging out of her arm . . . After that we didn't take too much blood samples."

Dr. Ryan Krebs, one of the defendants, was paid \$100 an hour at a clinic on Seven Mile Road, **Kassim** testified, but was not told of the extent of the illicit operations. "He was nosy, but I told him to stay in his room," **Kassim** said.

Later, at a new clinic on Jefferson near Newport, Krebs overheard a conversation involving a drug dealer who came in with 50 sets of identification and wanted prescriptions for each set, **Kassim** said.

KASSIM SAID Krebs asked her how long it would take to earn a million dollars writing prescriptions, and she told him if he wanted to start then, "it's fine with me."

Eventually, Krebs would leave stacks of prescriptions already written out for her to sell, she testified.

Kassim 's testimony is expected to continue today.

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