



FUSION



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# THE WALTER WHITE OF WICHITA

GEORGE MARQUARDT WAS AN ECCENTRIC GADGETEER IN KANSAS. BUT HIS SELF-  
TAUGHT CHEMISTRY MADE DRUG DEALERS MILLIONS. AND WHEN FEDERAL AGENTS  
FINALLY CAUGHT HIM, AMERICA'S FIRST FENTANYL EPIDEMIC CAME TO A  
SCREECHING HALT.

BY CRISTINA COSTANTINI AND DARREN FOSTER  
ADDITIONAL REPORTING BY ADAM WEINSTEIN



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one of the most potent opiates in human history — 100 times more powerful than morphine, and 50 times stronger than heroin alone. It is now flooding the streets as an addictive recreational drug, adding a terrifying turn to the worst narcotics epidemic in American history.

Fentanyl was originally available only as a highly controlled prescription, but legitimate drugmakers have developed new fentanyl prescription products, and its uses have expanded. Illicit dealers have figured out how to replicate it. The drug is routinely cut up with heroin or sold on its own in glassine Baggies stamped with names like “Drop Dead” or “Tango & Cash.” In New Hampshire, 28 people died overdosing on pure heroin last year. Nearly ten times that number -- 253 -- overdosed fatally on fentanyl or fentanyl-laced heroin.

The current epidemic, however, is not the first time fentanyl has shown up as a highly addictive killer in alleys and apartments across America. In the early 1990's, Drug Enforcement Administration officers started to track a rash of fatal fentanyl overdoses in the northeastern U.S. They **FOUND BETWEEN 126 AND 300**



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***“IN A FEEL THAT WILL MANUFACTURE A CHEMICAL COMPOUND IF  
YOU HAVE A SUFFICIENTLY LARGE QUANTITY OF MONEY.”***

Fentanyl is so deadly that it’s nearly impossible to cut or create safely in a clandestine setting. But someone was doing just that: It appeared to investigators that an enterprising individual had cracked the prescription’s recipe in an illegal lab and was now selling his secret to drug dealers and other “cooks.”

They were right. Their man was a onetime science-fair champion and self-taught chemist in Wichita, Kansas, named George Marquardt.

In an exclusive interview with Fusion, Marquardt -- now 69 and an ex-convict, barred by a court from touching laboratory equipment -- discussed his skills and his trade.



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He explained to Packer how he first got involved in illegal drug production, working with a friend to produce heroin using basic lab equipment and old chemistry manuals, some printed in German.

"I was perhaps about 14 or 15 years old at the time," he said.

"This is not, you know, as remarkable as you might think," he added. "If you look through these old laboratory manuals, this is just chemistry. Put one step ahead of the next. You work up your products. And I became skillful at feeding one reaction into the other."

This is the real life Walter White





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In a court hearing, he famously identified his profession as “drug manufacturer.” When asked by the judge what kind of drugmaker he was, he replied: “Clandestine.” (“It was a very polite exchange,” he told Fusion.) A retired DEA agent involved in the hunt for Marquardt calls him the very best illicit chemist in the history of American drugmaking. The best, and one of the deadliest. He was described variously by reporters in the ’90s as a “mythical figure,” an “evil genius,” and a “serial killer.”

On many particulars, such as how to make specific drugs or whom he worked with, Marquardt was purposefully vague. Many of his more colorful claims could not be confirmed. He is, after all, a convicted drugmaker. But federal officials Fusion spoke with said Marquardt’s terrible accomplishments lived up to the legend in more than a few respects.



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The guy can make dope out of the dirt in your pockets, a Washington state drug agent told the Canberra Times of Marquardt in 1993.

John Madinger, another retired narcotics agent who first met Marquardt after the black-market scientist was busted cooking methamphetamine in Oklahoma, scoffed at the idea of comparing Marquardt to **WALTER WHITE**, the high school teacher-turned meth-making kingpin in AMC's TV series Breaking Bad. The fictional character, Madinger said, has nothing on the real deal.

"Above [Walter White] you've got Marquardt, who can manufacture the precursors and analyze them with a machine that he built himself, and installed in his laboratory," he said. "Nobody's ever done that before in the United States or since. He's the only one."



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***MARQUARDT WOULD EITHER WIN A NOBEL PRIZE OR END UP BEHIND BARS, CHILDHOOD FRIENDS SAID.***

A science prodigy from a young age, Marquardt grew up in a family that fed his curiosities about the physical world. His father, he says, was fascinated by metallurgy -- a product of the elder Marquardt's business, working for a firm that made steel appliances for other manufacturers. "This was just sort of always around me," he said. "I thought this was utterly fascinating."

It was 1964 when the curious teen first hooked up with a supplier to make illegal narcotics in Waukesha, Wisconsin, a sleepy Milwaukee suburb. "This was in the basement of my parents' house," he said. "A lot of chemistry was going on there."



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From there, he branched out. Mandemegon... and things like mescaline, or, he trimethoxyphenethylamine," he said. "I was at a party one time with my girlfriend. And I was given a couple of mescaline bottles by a fellow there. 'Oh, you're some kind of a chemical technician. You can make this stuff, can you?'"

From there, his business grew in earnest. "Most often what would happen is someone would promise us, 'Well, you know, if you can make a pound of this or that, we can get you some money.'" Most of what he made were other ingredients for illicit drugs that would raise flags if dealers bought them from a chemical supplier -- "precursors," Marquardt called them. It was slow work, not always terribly profitable. Drug chemistry "was one of several opportunities" for a man like him. There were others available, he claimed: "I contemplated counterfeiting at one time."

Then came the 1970s and the drug war. "Oh my goodness, now I have a business," he thought. He churned out precursors to amphetamines, Mescaline, and LSD.





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***“OH MY GOODNESS, NOW I HAVE A BUSINESS.”***

The specter of arrest and incarceration didn't seem to bother Marquardt much. In 1978, when cops raided his lab in Oklahoma, he **WALKED THEM THROUGH HIS PROCESS FOR COOKING METH** and quickly pled guilty to his charges.

It was in jail, among other entrepreneurs of the drug trade, that he first heard about fentanyl and its powerful properties. By 1989, he was helping dealers develop a market for the compound.

He may have struck his buyers as a wizard, but making fentanyl in a lab was neither easy nor quick. “Eight, ten days of some pretty severe work is not uncommon,” he said. “Some of these reactions are long. You can shorten them



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just to make the product. You have to stay on law enforcement's radar. I wanted to make it appear to the opposition that there was more than one fentanyl laboratory" by varying the drug's molecular "fingerprint," Marquardt said.

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And he wanted to disguise the drug so it wouldn't show up in standard testing. "I read the forensic science literature religiously. I read publications like Police Science Abstracts. Surveyed all the appearance or the appearances of fentanyl



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strong incentives to cover their tracks and shut up their suppliers. Death at the hands of drug kingpins was always possible, though Marquardt thought they'd be irrational to pull anything like that on him. Unlike with a coca or opium farmer, "they can't really easily replace you," he said. "The more elaborate and complex the plan becomes, the less likely it is that they're going to be able to get rid of you. And of course if they try to shoot you or something like that, they've lost their investment. They have nothing at all."

The fact that Marquardt wasn't killed by his work is the best indication of his chemical genius, narcotics agents say, given the lethality of the drugs he was cooking. "That in itself indicates an astonishing level of chemical skill, especially for someone who never went to college," former DEA forensic chemist Sandy Angelos said in 1993.

Explosions were possible, and toxic fumes were produced. Contacting the drug or some of its precursors with the skin could be fatal. "If he makes a mistake...



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I was going out into the world and I wasn't particularly interested in a structured lifestyle," he said, adding he operated as a "free marketeer and a consultant" on workdays. "My name was known and I went to this dealer and that dealer and the other dealer and generated as much capital as possible and went about living my life, you know." His livelihood gave him time to spend on other passions -- listening to classical symphonies and visiting concert halls.

Asked why he didn't go to college and become a professional chemical engineer, Marquardt laughed. "Doesn't pay very much," he said, relating a story about an educated friend, "a legendary oil field inventor," who devised a new technique to extract oil from the ground. "And he really never made any significant amounts of money out of that thing," Marquardt said. "Other people made the money, not the technical person." Besides, PhDs' lives were dull: "They get focused in rather narrow areas. And they end up spending, you know... what's that term? Lives of quiet desperation."



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***ASKED WHY HE DIDN'T GO TO COLLEGE AND BECOME A  
PROFESSIONAL CHEMICAL ENGINEER, MARQUARDT LAUGHED.  
"DOESN'T PAY VERY MUCH."***

"Too smart" goes a long way to explaining the drugmaker's psyche. Marquardt would either win a Nobel Prize or end up behind bars, childhood friends said. They were right.



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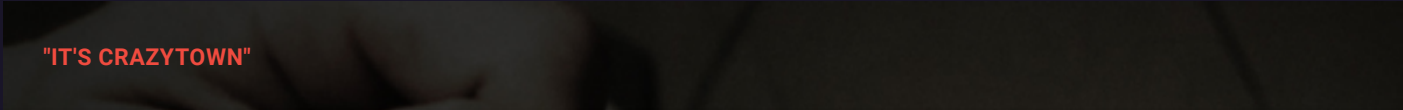
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The man was **JOSEPH MARTIER**, one of Marquardt's associates. "He was actually exposed to no fumes," Marquardt said. "He did the drug." Unable to revive Martier after finding him overdosed in the bathroom, Marquardt had called 911. EMTs and doctors at the hospital, having seen Marquardt's setup, started to piece things together that night, he says.

Marquardt felt the eyes on him at the hospital, imagined the doctors thinking: "Who is this guy wandering around at 2:30 in the morning in a pair of bib overalls that drives a pickup truck that owns a high resolution mass spectrometer and runs a laboratory?" At that point, he figured it was a matter of time before police arrested them both. When his car was surrounded by police shortly after, he said, "I was surprised that it took them that long to put it together."

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**"IT'S CRAZYTOWN"**



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As in 1978, he immediately confessed his crimes to the authorities. “I just don’t bother with the lies,” he said. “When the game’s over, it’s just over. If you can’t deal with the consequences of these things, you should have carried a lunch bucket.”

DEA agents suspect Marquardt’s Wichita lab was the sole source of the potent drug that killed somewhere between 126 and 300 people at the time, but owing to his masking methods, they’ll never be sure. He was sentenced to 25 years, eventually serving 22 before his release last year. As soon as he was jailed, the nation’s torrent of deadly fentanyl overdoses dried up.



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***"YOU DON'T QUIT ON YOUR OWN, BECAUSE A PILE OF MONEY IS AN EXCEEDINGLY ATTRACTIVE SIGHT."***

For a man whose concoctions caused between 126 and 300 deaths, George Marquardt seems remarkably sanguine about his former business; some of his fiercer critics have suggested he's sociopathic. "The dope users know that to use these things are extremely high risk," he said:

*It makes it attractive to them, in fact. They court these risks. I put this to a fellow one time: "If we could make this risk-free, would you be interested in it?" And he says, "No, I like to live on the edge." And so it's, if you will, a kind of a partnership forged in hell, right? And everybody basically knows we're on the same page in that regard. So I*





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them, he said of drug dealers. "They are what they are. I am what I am. We're both criminals."

Would he cook fentanyl again? Nope. "Scares me to death," he said. "Too popular." There are dozens, perhaps hundreds, of enterprising black-market Marquardts making fentanyl now, spurred in part by prescription fentanyl reaching a widening net of patients -- more recipes for the drug filtering down to the streets, making their way to more addicts and would-be basement chemists.

He sees no reason why that number of drug entrepreneurs would ever shrink: "The way you quit is the D.E.A. or the state agencies knock you out of the business," he said. "You don't quit on your own, because a pile of money is an exceedingly attractive sight."

Now, an illegal market that owes much of its existence to George Marquardt has passed him by. So has the world, in many respects. Before sitting down for this

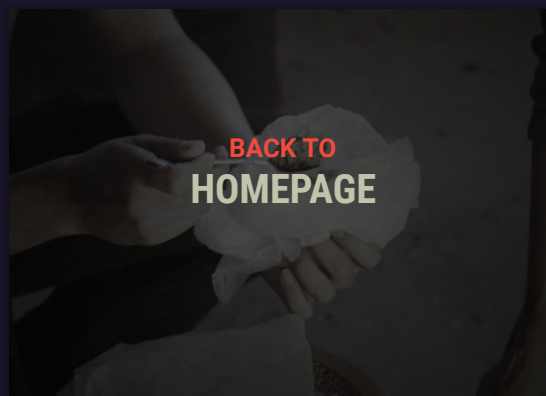
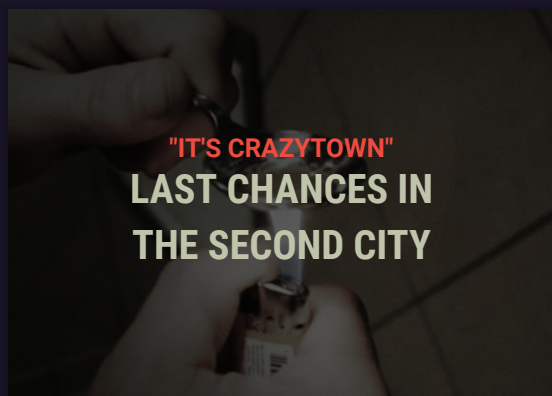


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