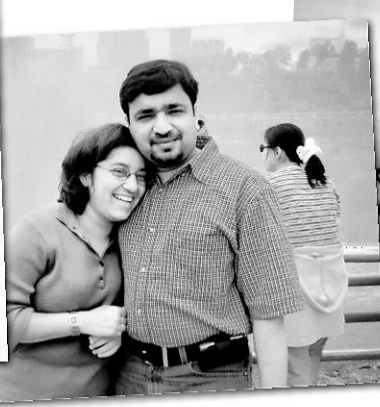
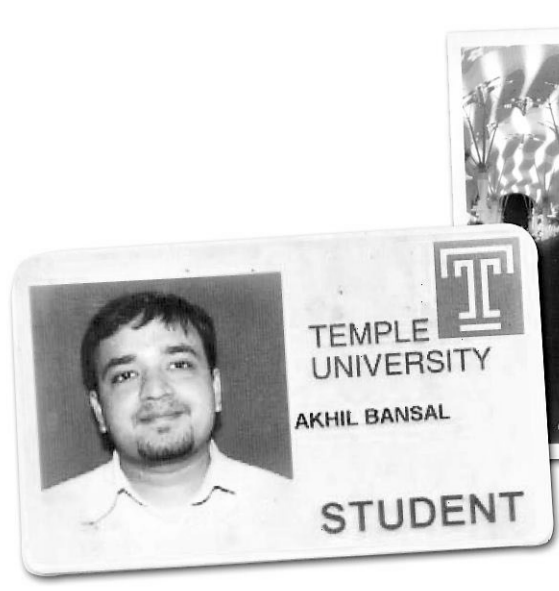




# DRUGNET IN PURSUIT OF CYBERSPACE DRUG DEALERS

philly.com Hear an interview with DEA Administrator Karen Tandy. Find links to DEA and other sites on online drugs. <http://go.philly.com/drugnet>



**Akhil Bansal balanced studies at Temple** with trips with his fiancée and friends to Las Vegas, Niagara Falls, London — and work with his father to supply online pharmacies.

# ... collide in worldwide web

**DRUGNET** from A16

protect the targets, allowing Akhil and others to flee with millions? Would magistrates in several states authorize search warrants in time? Would the bad guys be there when agents raided their homes at dawn? Had any of them gotten wind of the premature arrest in New York? Did Akhil, as he implied in e-mails, really have a mole inside U.S. Customs?

Had they overlooked anything? James Kasson, the top DEA official in Philadelphia, a weightlifter with a New York accent, began with a pep talk. What they were doing, he reminded the agents, was important, cutting-edge.

"The administrator is personally watching," Kasson said, citing Karen Tandy, DEA's top official in Washington.

Congress was pressuring Tandy to do something about illegal online pharmacies. She recognized the emerging public health threat. After all, any kid with a credit card and Internet access could order highly addictive drugs from the safety of home. But so far, DEA had struggled to take down the rogue pharmacies.

Tandy was counting on the Bansal case to make a splash.

In D.C., there was talk that the attorney general himself would announce the bust. In New York, DEA agents were going to let ABC News go along on the raids. In Philadelphia, U.S. Attorney Patrick Meehan prepped for his news conference.



**DEA supervisor Jeff Breeden, in his Center City office**, and others worked on the pioneering investigation, the national agency's first major global online pharmacy case.

As the briefing broke up, the FBI agent on the case, Jason Huff, a bright young techie, approached the lead DEA agent, Eric Russ, a no-nonsense former Marine. Huff proposed an overnight stakeout of Akhil's Roxborough apartment, in case he and his roommate tried to flee.

Russ liked Huff, but Russ had a lot to coordinate, too much to accomplish before morning, and a stakeout wasn't part of the plan. He doubted anyone would run. These targets were computer nerds, not street thugs. If they hadn't detected surveillance trailing them for the last nine months, they weren't likely to be spooked at the eleventh hour.

tion, he knew the next 24 hours were vital.

For six months, Siddiqui had kept the Bansal case a closely guarded secret. Leaks and corruption were endemic in the Indian government, and Siddiqui feared someone would tip the targets in Agra or Delhi.

Akhil Bansal's father, Brij, was wealthy. If he knew what was coming, he might flee to nearby Nepal.

On the eve of the arrests, Siddiqui had had no choice but to let dozens of officials know about the case — agents, their superiors, lo-

would meet a magistrate after hours to get warrants approved. After 24 years — a career that included the successful prosecution of a KGB spy — Cohan was leaving the U.S. Attorney's Office.

That her last case was so important, so fascinating, so challenging, gave Cohan special satisfaction. Akhil's business acumen both impressed and repulsed her.

The prosecutor bit into the bagel, sipped some coffee. She looked up at Lower Merion Police Officer Christine Konieczny.

"Do you think he has any idea

\$400,000 medical transcription business; his best friend and his roommate were in South Carolina to close the deal. He was feuding with his sister over control of their father's business. And, in 12 days, he had final exams at Temple.

Then there was that odd New York situation. When his client, a New York Web site operator, had failed to respond for a few days, Akhil had Googled the man's name. The headlines shook him: "Internet Drug Ring Smashed," "Cyber Gangs Charged."

customer. A warning from his father.

Akhil hunted through his wallet and found a credit card that worked. He bought two tickets home — one departing Toronto on Air Canada and one departing Newark on Virgin Atlantic. Booking two flights gave him a backup, and a decoy.

Then Akhil called a classmate. He needed a big favor; there was trouble. Could the friend come over?

Akhil explained that he needed to leave for Toronto right away but didn't want to use his own car. Akhil's friend could sleep in the passenger seat while Akhil drove all night. To cross the border, Akhil reserved a rental car in Detroit, a Ford Escape.

At 1:40 a.m., Akhil emerged from his apartment into the crisp night air. He rolled his canvas suitcase to his friend's SUV and put his laptop in the backseat. He pocketed a handful of the pick-me-up Provigil, his drug of choice.

Then Akhil got behind the wheel and headed west.



**IN A SWEATY HOTEL ROOM ... THE INDIAN DRUG AGENT LISTENED TO A REPLAY OF THE BANSALS' FATHER-SON CALL ... "START TAKING PRECAUTIONS ... KEEP AN OPEN TICKET ... AS SOON AS YOU SMELL TROUBLE YOU CAN LEAVE BY THE TIME THEY REACH YOU."**

Huff offered to have his FBI squad sit on the Roxborough apartment. Russ wasn't in the mood to argue. He thought, *Knock yourself out, bud. I'm going home. I've got to be back here at 5 a.m. to coordinate arrests in five countries.*

In the meantime, Kasson walked over to chat with Breeden, the nervous supervisor.

Kasson could see Breeden was tense. He tried some DEA humor. "All right, Breeden," he said. "It's all on your shoulders now."

Wonderful, Breeden thought, knowing the boss was half-joking. He rubbed his forehead.

cal police. Who knew whom they might tell?

Siddiqui felt helpless. So much was at stake. The case. His reputation. The reputation of NCB. Of India.

If we screw this up, he thought, the Americans will think we are incompetent.

## **DUNKIN' DONUTS, NORTHEAST PHILA.**

Prosecutor Barbara Cohan handed the search warrants to the magistrate judge on call.

It was well past 9 p.m.

Cohan ordered a large black coffee and an egg-and-bacon bagel, her first meal since breakfast, her first chance to exhale.

While the judge reviewed the paperwork, Cohan joined two cops at another table. They toasted her silently, clicking styrofoam. This was her last case as a federal prosecutor, probably the last time she

what's about to happen to him?"

"If he did —" Konieczny said.

"He'd run," Cohan said.

Everyone laughed.

They talked about that sweet moment — hours away — when agents would cuff Akhil.

Cohan said, "Wouldn't you just love to see the look on his face?"

## **ROXBOROUGH**

About 10 p.m., Akhil received a call from India.

It was his mom, worried about his dad. Brij had a serious heart ailment, and twice since January Akhil had flown home to take him to specialists. Now Brij's hands and feet were swelling, a sign his heart wasn't pumping properly. Though he was a doctor, Brij was a stubborn patient.

Akhil tried to calm his mother. He promised to see her soon.

He hung up and sat down.

The timing couldn't be worse: He was days away from buying a

Akhil recalled his father's warning: *Keep an open ticket ... leave ...*

Akhil got online and checked his favorite airline, Virgin Atlantic. A flight was leaving Newark, N.J., for London in nine hours. He booked it and pulled out his Bank of America debit card.

The card was rejected.

Akhil tried again. Rejected again. He tried another card. It didn't work, either. He tried an Air Canada flight from Toronto, leaving in 19 hours. No luck.

How could the bank screw up this badly? He had \$401,881 in that account!

He logged on to bankofamerica.com. The account showed a negative balance.

He dialed the bank's 800 number. A woman who answered told him to call a Philadelphia number in the morning. She said, "Legal restrictions have been placed on the accounts."

Legal restrictions?

Legal restrictions. An arrested

## **BREEDEN'S HOME, DOWNINGTOWN**

The DEA supervisor's cell phone woke him from a deep sleep at 1:42 a.m. He groped for the phone, but the call slipped to voicemail.

As Breeden fumbled to retrieve the message, the phone rang again. It was a DEA agent on the other side of the world.

The guy in India got right to it: There was a new wiretap from Brij's phone. It looked like Akhil planned to flee his Philadelphia apartment and probably leave the country. In fact, he might already be gone.

"Jeff," the agent said, "we need to get out there."

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## **TOMORROW: ORIGINS**

The making of a millionaire, and suspicious packages at the airport

## **NEW DELHI**

The deputy director of investigations for India's Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) was senior enough to create an air-conditioner in his office. Yet Ahmad Payam Siddiqui was sweating anyway.

As the top official involved in the country's first Internet investiga-

JOHN SHIFFMAN / Inquirer Staff