

Legalizing The Commonwealth?

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• Author/Byline: RACHEL CISTO

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HARRISONBURG - Nikki Narduzzi calls medical marijuana "a gateway out of hard drug use."

The 38-year-old from Staunton has Crohn's disease, and has had several surgeries since her diagnosis. Narduzzi said she was given strong, opiate pain medications after a surgery earlier this year, and sent home.

"I was convinced they were sending me home to die," she said.

Though she was reluctant at first, she said some members her family talked her into trying out medical marijuana. Much to her surprise, it helped. Much more than the opiates had.

In fact, she used medical marijuana to reduce her dependence on opiates. Narduzzi, once taking anywhere from 10 to 15 different prescriptions at a time, now takes one dose a week of an anti-inflammatory drug, and a shot of vitamin B12 once a month.

She became involved in activism after she stopped taking the opiates, and now serves as the secretary for the Virginia chapter of RAMP - Republicans Against Marijuana Prohibition.

Narduzzi and VA RAMP President Vivienne Smith spoke at the October meeting of the new Harrisonburg chapter of the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws at 3 Notch'd Brewing in Harrisonburg.

Both called medicinal marijuana a bipartisan issue. Narduzzi said it's often easier to meet with Republican legislators, being a Republican herself.

"Sometimes you go in like, 'hey, I'm a Republican too, I voted you into office, listen to me,' and they're usually really open to it," she said. "It's really non-confrontational."

An "Unlikely Activist"

Harrisonburg NORML President Matt Lamoureux also suffers from Crohn's disease, and says he too has benefited from the use of medicinal marijuana.

Lamoureux moved to Harrisonburg earlier this year from Montgomery County, Texas, where he'd also been involved in a NORML chapter.

"The first meeting was so easy and empowering," he said. "We're all so used to being scared to admit we'd used medical marijuana, but if we don't stand up and say something, nothing will ever change."

Lamoureux called himself an unlikely activist. "It was really the last thing I wanted to do, but the more I got involved, the more I liked it."

While there are several other NORML chapters in Virginia, interested participants from the Valley would have had to travel to Charlottesville, Lynchburg or Roanoke to attend a meeting.

Lamoureux said the organization's Virginia executive director encouraged him to start a chapter in Harrisonburg, but he was reluctant at first.

"I reached out to her because I wanted to participate, not really because I wanted to lead a chapter," he said.

He said he changed his mind after attending a meeting of the Massanutten Tea Party in August.

Lamoureux said Del. Steve Landes, R-Weyers Cave, had been scheduled to attend the meeting, and he wanted to ask the delegate's feeling on medical marijuana.

"One of his aides was speaking, so I asked, and they actually laughed at me and said 'I don't know, no one's ever asked us that before,'" he recalled.

Lamoureux said he began the process to launch Harrisonburg NORML that day.

He said part of the group's mission is showing that the traditional stereotype of the marijuana user is inaccurate.

"I did everything I was supposed to do - I went to college, I have my MBA, I have a good job," he said. "It's an issue of personal liberty. No one should care what I do in my own home to make my dinner go down easier."

Medical Benefits

Lamoureux and Narduzzi's cases for medicinal marijuana might have some merit. Several small-sample studies have shown cannabinoids could reduce intestinal inflammation, though the Crohn's and Colitis Foundation of America warns there is still not enough information.

Several other small-sample studies have examined marijuana's effects on other conditions.

A 2014 case study from the University of Colorado at Denver looked at a 5-year-old girl named Charlotte, diagnosed with Dravet syndrome, a severe form of infant epilepsy.

Charlotte was unresponsive to every medication her doctors tried and was having 50 seizures a day on average.

Charlotte's mother began treating her with a strain of marijuana with a high cannabidiol content, and a low amount of THC - the primary intoxicator.

After treatment began, the frequency of Charlotte's seizures decreased dramatically to two or three per month. The study says Charlotte's seizures returned when the CBD oil was reduced.

Legislating Marijuana

In the Commonwealth of Virginia, House Bill 1445 was signed into law in February, allowing the use of limited types of these CBD-rich oils to treat severe, intractable epilepsy like Charlotte's, and allowing medical professionals to prescribe and distribute the oils.

However, HB 1445 does not make it legal for patients or guardians of a patient under 18 to carry the oil on them - it only gives them an "affirmative defense" against criminal prosecution.

Three other marijuana bills cropped up in the General Assembly during their 2015 session. The bill legalizing industrial production and use of hemp was the only bill to make it out of committee.

Hemp is a specific strain of the cannabis plant that does not contain THC.

Hemp can be used to manufacture products ranging from fabric to food.

Virginia is one of 26 states in the U.S. to legalize industrial hemp, joining fellow southern states Kentucky, Maryland, South Carolina, West Virginia and Tennessee.

The other two bills proposed legalization of medicinal marijuana for several conditions and the decriminalization of small amounts of the drug.

Sens. Adam Ebbin, D-Alexandria, and Kaye Kory, D-Falls Church, proposed SB 686, which would have decriminalized possession of less than a half-ounce of marijuana.

Under the bill, offenders would have paid a \$100 civil fine instead of facing jail time or parole.

SB 686 was tabled in the Courts of Justice committee in January.

Del. Ken Plum, D-Reston, sponsored HB 1605, which would have authorized medicinal marijuana for any condition, provided a doctor recommended it "in the course of such doctor's professional practice."

HB 1605 was abandoned in the Courts of Justice Committee in February.

Del. Tony Wilt, R-Broadway, voted in favor of both legalizing cannabis oil and industrial hemp, but said he wasn't sure about moving any further.

"I would have to look at the testimony and facts and try to make the best decision," he said.

Wilt said the testimony and facts were both large parts of his decision to support HB 1445. "I saw the evidence presented, and those in favor made a strong case, plus, there was medical proof," he said.

"Misinformation and Disconnect"

Nancy Hans, chair of Community Coalitions of Virginia, says that might not be enough.

Hans, also the executive director of the Prevention Council of Roanoke County, said there is a lot of "misinformation and disconnect" when it comes to discussing marijuana.

"No medical doctor can write a prescription for 'a couple of joints.' There's no dosage or consistency," she said. "By the way we regulate medicine, marijuana is not medicine."

Hans said Community Coalitions is taking what she called a "stop, wait and listen" approach to any further legalization of medicinal marijuana, asking lawmakers to watch what's happening in Colorado and Washington before supporting expansion of the medicinal marijuana program.

She also said coalition members are concerned an expansion of medicinal access to marijuana could lead to legal recreational use, which she warns is not as harmless as many make it out to be.

"Colorado missed their revenue target last year. It's hard to understand the support for it," she said. "So far, there isn't anything that says, 'yes, this makes total sense.'"

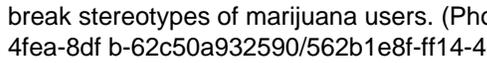
Hans said coalition members attended a panel in Colo. last week about marijuana in schools.

"The schools said they're seeing an increase in middle schoolers bringing in pot," she said. "If you use substances at that age, you're just setting yourself up for trouble."

When it comes to recreational use, Wilt said he was hesitant, and still had a lot of questions that would have to be answered before he considered legalization.

"But it's at least worth being open to all the facts," he said.

Contact Rachel Cisto at 574-6272 or rcisto@dnronline.com

- Caption: Nikki Narduzzi, 38, of Staunton, sits with all the medications she used to take to treat her Crohn's disease. Narduzzi says she was able to greatly reduce the amount of medication she takes with the help marijuana. She is advocating for state legalization of medical marijuana as secretary of Virginia Republicans Against Marijuana Prohibition. (Photo by Nikki Fox) Scott McLellan, president of Harrisonburg's chapter of National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws, poses on Court Square. Part of NORML's mission is to break stereotypes of marijuana users. (Photo by Daniel Lin)  http://www.dnronline.com/files/uploads/article_images/562b1e40-b3e4-4fea-8dfb-62c50a932590/562b1eae-41bc-4a2f-aed0-63300a932590.jpg /IMG>

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