*"We were dying and marijuana was all we had."*

# During the Darkest Days of AIDS, Cannabis was Often the Only Respite

*A World AIDS Day Special Feature Article* by Betsy Pisik for **WM Policy**

Mention "the 1980s" to most anyone and their recollection might range from the New Right to MTV. The decade introduced us to England's Lady Diana Spencer and her transformation into a global icon, ET: the Extraterrestrial, Madonna, Roseanne, the Cosby Family, the Carrington Dynasty and yuppies. Marked by consumerism, materialism and conservatism, the decade was epitomized by the presidency of Ronald Reagan.

But the 1980s came to be known for something else, too. A mysterious disease was discovered and was raising all sorts of concern. On July 3, 1981, the New York Times reported on a "Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals" (The New York Native, an LGBTQ weekly publication reported on this mysterious medical issue in May, making it the first news media outlet to cover AIDS).

Around the same time in California, post-hippie interest in cannabis as medicine was emerging in earnest, laying the groundwork for the Golden State to become, decades later, the capital of the legal cannabis industry.

San Francisco became Ground Zero for both.

The City on the Bay, particularly the Castro, a formerly working class neighborhood in Eureka Valley, had became a haven for Gay men. And the city's eclectic counter culture vibe--reflected in neighborhoods like Haight-Asburry, the Mission and North Beach--were known to be more than "cannabis friendly."

## A "Gay Cancer" and a Plant

In "gayborhoods" like the Castro, as well as Christopher Street in New York City, Chicago's BoysTown and DuPont Circle in the nation's capital among others, panic set in. Gay men were dying of  a strange virus or "a gay cancer" that the Centers for Disease Control in 1982 identifies AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome).

During the 1980s, an AIDS diagnosis was nothing less than a death sentence--and in most cases, a horrible, painful and lonely death. The disease melted flesh from bone and robbed victims of their sight, their memory and too often, their dignity.

LGBTQ activism was nascent. Marriage equality? Out-of-the-closet elected officials? Same-sex couples adopting chirldren? All were unheard of at the time. People suffering from AIDS, predominantly gay and bisexual men, were often rejected by their families and sometimes abandoned by friends.

The medications used to treat AIDS seemed toxic--the side effects were often as unbearable as the virus itself.

But there was something that provided a bit of relief: cannabis.

Cannabis calmed the incessant nausea, soothed pain, and stimulated appetite. It subdued anxiety, and calmed patients as they came closer to their last breath. It was for some, as Carl Fillichio, a Weedmaps vice president and early AIDS activist in Washington, DC recalled, "the only thing good in their day."

"It's hard for younger people today to imagine what it was like," Fillichio continued. "It was so incredibly sad and gut wrenching. Guys were just skin and bones. They just layed there, watching idiots on television say the disease was 'killing all the right people.' Nobody knew how you got it, and nobody knew who would get it next. But pot, that was like water in the desert for a lot of guys--some joy and a brief respite to get through the pain and discomfort, and the endless hours of endless days. I used to sneak it in to my buddies in hospice."

Cannabis had been around forever. It's use and benefits recorded as far back as the ancient Chinese pharmacology.

But it was also illegal, categorized by the United States government as having no accepted medical use and a high potential for abuse. It was and continues to be grouped by the government with heroin, LSD and ecstasy. Nonetheless, for many AIDS patients in the early days of the pandemic, a few illicit pulls on a joint or sips of cannabis tea were the only cessation from unrelenting torment.

## "AIDS threw a grenade onto the dance floor."

"I was projectile vomiting. I was in pain all the time. I was sick all the time. I began using marijuana because of the medicine [to treat AIDS]. I was taking 12 pills every day and the side effects were killing me," said Paul Scott, a veteran who worked as a nurse in several Los Angeles hospital AIDS wards in the early 1980s. "You have to understand, we were dying and marijuana was all we had. You can't think back to one without the other."

Cannabis gave people suffering from AIDS some comfort and relief. And that helped give cannabis its medical credibility. But that didn't mean that it was easy for AIDS patients to get it.

This was the "Just Say No" era of Ronald Reagan, after all. There wasn't a role in the movie script for Kaposi Sarcoma, the stomach-churning lesions that appeared all over the bodies of many AIDS patients. "The 'city on a hill' didn't welcome homosexuals, especially sick ones," noted Fillichio, adding, "It was 'morning in America' for them, and 'mourning in America' for us."

"We had started to make progress," said John Entwistle, a gay man and cannabis activist from New York who landed in San Francisco in 1983. "AIDS threw a grenade onto the dance floor."

Many lay dying but others were finding their life's work. Mary Jane Rathbun, who later became better known as "Brownie Mary" baked "magic" brownies for suffering and dying AIDS patients and delivered them with love. Dennis Peron, a gay activist and cannabis advocate, changed the law and opened the country's first legal medical cannabis dispensary. They were joined by enlightened politicians, sympathetic police officers, caretakers--mostly straight women-- and advocates, armies of gays and pot-smokers, and compassionate others. But it was Peron and Rathbun who lit the way.

**"Two-in-one!" Dennis Peron: Gay activist and marijuana advocate.**

As the autumn of 1989 became winter, Johnathan West lay restlessly in bed, contorted in pain, laboring for breath and wracked with persistent dread. He had full-blown AIDS. In other words, he was facing certain death.

The only thing that kept him comfortable was cannabis -- a salvation his lover, full-time pot dealer Dennis Peron, could easily provide. But when the San Francisco police raided their Castro a few months later, four ounces of cannabis was found and Peron was hauled off to jail.

As he sat behind bars, Peron was tortured by thoughts of West alone and in pain, with no support or medicine. When his case finally went to trial, West--emaciated and frail--testified that the weed was his medicine.

He died two weeks later.

“At that point, I didn’t know what I was living for,” Peron said soon afterward. “I was the loneliest guy in America. In my pain, I decided to leave Johnathan a legacy of love. I made it my moral pursuit to let everyone know about Jonathan’s life, his death, his use of marijuana and how it gave him dignity in his final days.”

West’s legacy would be legalization.

Peron--a born activist who had been selling cannabis illicitly for 20 years--decided it was time to ensure that the people needing marijuana should not risk arrest. He threw himself into legalization, starting with “Proposition P”-- the referendum effectively decriminalized growing, selling and using small amounts of cannabis for medical purposes within San Francisco’s city limits. Eighty percent of residents voted in favor of it in 1991.

Soon afterward, Peron opened something of a dispensary and smoking lounge in a one-bedroom apartment in the Castro. Members quickly outgrew the rooms. The San Francisco Cannabis Buyers Club moved two more times to larger spaces in the Castro. Each time, the SFCBC accommodated more patients and filled the community’s acute needs. The dispensary expanded to include edibles and tinctures, for example, and progressive politics entered the mix. Through all that change, Peron worked on legislation that would make medical cannabis legal in all of California, not just San Francisco.

Drafted to fight in Vietnam, the Bronx-born Peron discovered San Francisco on a layover and vowed to live there after the war. His Air Force service included working in the morgue during the Tet Offensive. Discharged in 1969, Peron returned to San Francisco during the Summer of Love toting two duffel bags of cannabis. He was handsome, smart, ambitious, committed, outspoken and, most importantly, out. He cheerfully described himself as a “hippie faggot” noting that he didn’t’ separate his roles as a gay activist and marijuana advocate. “Two-in-one!” he would exclaim.

Peron sold an unfathomable amount of cannabis, one bag of shake and one hand-rolled joint at a time. He also gave away an unknowable amount to those who were sick and needed it, but couldn’t afford it. His motto: “give it away before the cops take it.”

Peron used some of the profit from pot dealing to open the Island, a café that smelled like an Amsterdam coffee shop. It was a precursor to the Cannabis Buyers Club, with its casual drug use and the electricity of progressive politics. He was busted at least two dozen times by local law enforcement, but he was not deterred.

“I’m haunted by everything. I’m haunted by the Vietnam War, I’m haunted by the war on drugs, I’m haunted by starving people,” he told a reporter in 1975. “Marijuana does help me with all this haunting, but I’ve mostly learned to live with contradictions in life, live with the sadness and the deprivation and desires.”

“Dennis was radicalized in Vietnam,” said fellow cannabis activist Entwistle, a longtime comrade-in-arms who later married Peron. “He wanted to make the world a better place. And he had a little bit of an ego.” He was radicalized again by the virus that ravaged and killed his lover, his friends and countless others throughout his beloved Casto neighborhood.

Peron did not set out to be the father of medical cannabis. The AIDS pandemic forced him into the role. But he wasn't the only unlikely hero the disease called into service. An irascible retired waitress waitress had already begun baking stems and seeds into sweets.

## Mary Jane “Brownie Mary” Rathbun

She was a 60-year-old volunteer at San Francisco General Hospital’s AIDS ward in 1984, a time when some medical staff were still concerned about catching the disease from their patients. But she was fearless, visiting frightened, lonely, dying men suffering terrible pain. She kept them company, wiped their brow, read to them and fed them. Mary Jane Rathbun was a comforting figure, especially to patients whose own mothers could not or would not hold them close. Regardless of their age, she called them “my kids.”

They--and soon everyone else--called her Brownie Mary.

Born to a conservative Irish Catholic family in Chicago, Rathbun left home in her teens, worked as a union organizer, and was active in the pro-choice and atheist movements of the 1940s. She was briefly married and had a daughter who was killed in a car crash at age 19. She waited tables for 25 years at San Francisco’s International House of Pancakes, until her arthritis forced her to give it up.

She was not afraid of the once Adonis-like young faces, now despoiled with Kaposi Sarcoma lesions, or gaunt and sullen, a result of enduring the wasting condition of late-stage AIDS. Mary Jane – yes, that was her real name – had long championed cannabis’ relaxing and uplifting effect. She had admitted to smoking pot since her early thirties. But it was the early-1980s and she was a decade ahead of legalization. In fact, she had already been busted twice for possession, drawing only community service and probation.

At first, she sold pot brownies in the Castro to make a little cash. But when she started volunteering in the AIDS ward, she witnessed up close how the disease ravaged the body and mind of so many young men. So she began to bake her magic brownies with urgency.

“I make them for the worst of the patients, the ones on chemotherapy and the ones totally wasting away. I pick out the worst of the worst and turn them on,” she once remarked.

Brownie Mary didn’t fit the “pothead” mold. She wore polyester pants suits and oversize glasses. Her curly gray hair was short and neat. Sure, she had a mouth like a sailor, but she looked like anyone’s grandmother.

“She was the best speaker we ever had” at public events, said Entwistle. “She would start speaking and she had a direct connection to gays, smokers and everyone else.” Brownie Mary, he added, also had an endless supply of Betty Crocker jokes.

But she was serious about the medical benefits of cannabis and about the mission she undertook. “This is a medicine that works,” she once explained. “It works for the wasting syndrome--the kids have no appetite, but when they eat a brownie, they get out of bed and make themselves some food. And for chemotherapy--they eat half a brownie before a session, and when they get out, they eat the other half. It eases the pain. That's what I'm here to do.”

It was inevitable that Brownie Mary would meet Dennis Peron, a prominent activist for gay rights and medical marijuana, at a smoke-in. They were both positive people, energetic and committed to ending the war in Vietnam. They became fast friends and two decades later published the counterculture classic *Brownie Mary's Marijuana Cookbook and Dennis Peron's Recipe for Social Change*.” One copy is available on Amazon, yours for $269.51.

## Rock Hudson, The Reagans and “Just Say No.”

Cannabis became an outlaw in 1971, the year President Richard Nixon defined it a dangerous substance with no medicinal value. Nixon weaponized cannabis to imprison and silence blacks and hippies – two groups most opposed to the Vietnam war. The government’s cannabis prohibition remains in place, even now, as one-in-three Americans live in a place where cannabis is legal.

Another son of California, President Ronald Reagan, doubled down on the eroding prohibition a decade later with dubious anti-drug programs such as “just say no.” Crack cocaine was a huge

problem in the early 1980s, but the Administration focused their attention primarily on cannabis.

Concurrently, the AIDS crisis surged. But President Reagan refused to acknowledge it from the White House--an astounding repudiation of what was quickly becoming a pandemic. The former actor and his fashion-loving First Lady knew countless closeted gay men from their Hollywood days and tenure in Sacremento. Gay actors, artists, dancers, fashion designers, musical performers, hair and makeup professionals--just as cab drivers, bank executives, construction workers, teachers-- were hesitant to come "out" for fear a blemish on their face or a persistent cough might raise unwanted speculation. Careers, livilihoods, family and relationships were at stake.

Consider the actor Rock Hudson, the epitome of Hollywood hetero-manliness. The first major celebrity to go public about his diagnosis (but not his sexuality), Hudson died of AIDS in 1985. He supposedly asked his friends the Reagans for assistance getting into a French research trial the year before. Nancy Reagan refused to take his call.

Twenty-three thousand people had died of the disease by April 1987, when Reagan finally mentioned AIDS. The speech was a celebration of American medical advances. The context was to urge children to abstain from sex. Meanwhile, the federal government was using infra-red cameras and spy planes to find illegal cannabis "grows." And the First Lady's anti-drug propaganda continued in full force. Mrs. Reagan appeared on the television sitcom "Diff'rent Strokes" to advance her campaign. She enlisted Hollywood celebrities from Punky Brewster to Clint Eastwood, musicians like Michael Jackson, and even had the Los Angeles Lakers, New York Mets and Chicago Bears record catchy, "Just Say No" jingles. The idea that cannabis could actually do some good, and be a source of great comfort for AIDS patients, was never considered.

## Proposition P (as in Pot)

That only galvanized Rathbun, Peron and Entwistle to take action. In 1991--a decade after the first news reports of AIDS--the trio recruited their friends to share a different kind of drug message. The message was decriminalization, not recrimination. Together, they drafted "Proposition P" (as in Pot) to make marijuana-related offenses low-priority for San Francisco police and prosecutors, and make cannabis easier to obtain and use. Nearly 80 percent of the city's voters agreed with the referendum.

The following year, an empowered Dennis Peron rented a cavernous 2,000-square-foot second-floor space on Church Street for the San Francisco Cannabis Buyers' Club -- the first public medical cannabis dispensary in the United States. He chose a clean, well-lit building on a busy Castro intersection because he wanted a location that was easy for members to find and impossible for authorities to ignore. (They didn't even try: Documents show that SFPD planted undercover officers inside the club.) The site is so important to LGBTQ history that in 2014 the city painted the crosswalk in rainbow stripes.

Peron, Entwistle and Rathbun drafted the club rules and created a cheerful space with a hippie aesthetic: lots of worn rugs, mismatched furniture, wood and plants. People of all backgrounds gathered around the long refectory tables – either locked in their own conversations or drifting between others'. The place was lit by strings of Christmas lights and decorated with original artwork that was soon hung gallery-style all the way to the ceiling. The membership included HIV/AIDS patients as well as migraine sufferers, cancer patients and others with medical issues (and plenty of others with no apparent malady). All mingled easily. Budtenders, as they were called even then, sold an eighth of Mexican cannabis for $5, while the highest quality buds could go for as much as $50. A quart-size bag of shake was $15, which customers boiled in grain alcohol for tinctures or simmered into canna-butter to make cannabis-laced sweets. Peron himself was often behind the counter, enthusiastically greeting customers and making recommendations.

"I couldn't believe it when I saw it," recalls Paul Scott. "I was just looking for some weed. There were bands playing, people hanging out, laughing and lots of smoking. I went up to the fourth floor and there was hundreds of pounds of weed. I got the hell out of there."

The club was a scene, but it was also a haven.

Anyone with a doctor's note could join. People of all ages, incomes and ailments formed a community, drawn together by their common suffering and shared relief. Colorful origami cranes hung from the ceiling, in tribute to club members who passed on.

Five years later, San Francisco was still an oasis of compassion in a State that could, in theory, prosecute folks for smoking their own homegrown. California cannabis advocates had been unable to get legislation passed to legalize the plant statewide, so they took the issue directly to the people.

Along with Dale Gieringer of CALNORML, Peron and Entwistle were the chief drafters of Proposition 215, the referendum on medical marijuana.

According to Entwistle, the hardest part of the campaign was collecting the hundreds of thousands of signatures necessary to put the referendum on the ballot in November 1996. Peron over-estimated the number of signatures they could gather from the CBC's membership.

"Big money" was raised, but it arrived with strings. George Soros donated $350,000 on the condition that Peron step aside to let the effort be "professionalized." Others felt the same way. The "father of medical marijuana" was benched.

California's Republican establishment fought the measure with mailings and public service announcements on radio and television featuring former presidents Ford, Carter and Bush and leading health officials of the day. The issue divided California Democrats, as well. Senators Barbara Boxer and Diane Feinstein were both against it. Even President Bill Clinton, who tried cannabis in college, but didn't inhale, opposed it.

Despite the head winds, Proposition 215 passed on November 5, 1996, with 56 percent of the vote.

Other cannabis clubs, also known as cooperatives, soon opened. Across the Bay, the Oakland Cannabis Buyers' Cooperative was putting down roots--with Paul Scott seated among the first board members.

## A New Need

Some things change. Others remain the same. Brownie Mary died in 1999. Peron died in 2018. The San Francisco Cannabis Buyers Club is no longer in operation.

And an AIDS diagnosis is no longer a death sentence. Medical advances have made HIV/AIDS easier and faster to test for. Early treatment has made the disease more manageable. A cocktail of drugs is no longer prescribed. The new drugs have minimal side effects. Undetectable = untransmittable. It's better certainly, but it's not over.

Gabriel Quinto, today a Councilman in El Cerrito CA, says the 1996 referendum showed him that politics could be relevant--even to an HIV+ "starving sax player" who was diagnosed in his early 20s. Back then, Quinto and his friends relied on medical cannabis to help them deal with physical pain and mental uncertainty that came with the disease.

“I certainly wasn’t thinking about politics, about how I could serve my community,” recalls Quinto, who is active in Philippino and Asian legal groups and mentors young would-be politicians. “I didn’t have a role model, I had no idea I was interested in politics. “ Today, he works with community groups to ensure that medical cannabis is accessible to those who need it.

That need is still here. It’s wide, and encompasses larger-than-life public figures and those whom society would rather not notice.

Dr. Denise Taylor sees inmates at the California Men’s Colony in St. Louis Obispo. She specializes in HIV/AIDS. “The drugs are not as harsh as they were 20 years ago”, she said, referencing the variety of new drugs used to treat HIV. Nor are her patients’ so resistant to taking them.

Nonetheless, she said, cannabis could still be useful when it comes to HIV/AIDS. For different reasons.

“In my experience, medical marijuana would be a blessing,” she says. ”I could use tinctures and edibles against chronic pain, drug abuse, and chronic overuse of opioids. That would definitely reduce the drug use we see. People say marijuana is a gateway drug, but it can be really the opposite. Look at what it’s done with oxy, heroin and meth addictions.”

Like Dennis Peron and Brownie Mary saw 30 years ago, Dr. Taylor understands that it can be difficult for some policy makers and others to show compassion to those on the margins.

“But I think we’re getting better at it.”

**ENDS**