Don’t Cry for Me, Marijuana

Peron’s joint reopens as he faces life behind bars

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San Francisco’s Cannabis Cultivators Club reopened in January. Formerly known as the Cannabis Buyers Club, the nonprofit where members purchase and smoke pot to relieve illness was renamed to reflect its larger purpose: To harvest the herb. “That’s what Prop 215 is about--free medicine for people,” club founder Dennis Peron told *POZ.* “Once we start cultivating marijuana, the price will drop dramatically.” The Market Street club, which served some 12,000 sick clients was closed by a court order last August after a paramilitary-style bust.

After just two weeks of business, the reborn club had 1,500 applicants, 70 percent people with HIV. Regulations are stiffer than before, and applicants must present a letter of diagnosis and a doctor’s recommendation that the club confirms with a call. “The AIDS docs are standing up to the drug warriors,” Peron said. “They’re saying, ’[Drug czar] McCaffrey can take my license. I’m going to do what I think is right.’” Members can purchase pot products including pills, tinctures, baked goods and seven different kinds of marijuana ranging from $5 for “Mexican Sativa” to $65 for “California Skunkweed.”

The 50-year-old Vietnam vet, one of the med-marijuana movement’s most provocative crusaders, faces charges of conspiracy and drug trafficking. With two prior felony convictions, a third--under California’s “three strikes” provision--could mean life imprisonment.

Following the AIDS death of his longtime partner, Jonathan West, Peron led a ballot initiative to sanction the medical use of pot in San Francisco that passed in 1991. He founded the Cannabis Buyers Club in 1992 and formed Californians for Compassionate Use to initiate the successful Prop 215 drive. “I know I could go to jail for the rest of my life, but it doesn’t matter,” he said. “When I lost my lover, I didn’t know if I had much to live for so I didn’t give a shit about what they’d do to me. I want to leave a legacy of love for him.”

Despite the threat of “life squared,” Peron remains jaunty. “Eventually the government will admit what it already knows--that marijuana has medical benefits--and they’ll legalize it,” he said. "But my friends are sick and dying *now.* They don’t have time to wait." At presstime, his lawyers had filed a motion to dismiss the criminal charges in accordance with the new law.

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