Drag King

Peter McWilliams is a writer blocked.

June 1, 1999 By David Kirby

The federal government has handed down a sentence bestselling author Peter McWilliams would never write: Smoke pot to help save your life and you'll spend what's left of it in prison, with your mother and brother bereft of their homes. For McWilliams, a cancer survivor whose viral load spirals as nausea prevents him from keeping his HIV meds down, the government's stance seems particularly cruel and unusual.

"The federal government is putting me through life-and-death hell," McWilliams says. A Los Angeles resident, he awaits trial in federal court on eight felony counts including conspiracy to manufacture and distribute marijuana.

"Only by smoking marijuana can I tolerate these medications," says the author, currently on a regimen of 3TC, D4T and Sustiva—when he can hold them down. But as a condition of his bail, he is prohibited from smoking grass and is subject to urinalysis without warning. One positive test for marijuana use and McWilliams will forfeit his bail—including the houses of his mother and brother—and return to jail.

The court allows McWilliams to take Marinol, the synthetic pot substitute designed to boost appetite and help fight nausea, because drug tests are now sophisticated enough to distinguish between the legal med and nature's own outlaw weed. "But it is not nearly as effective," he says. "I can only keep my medications down for about 30 percent as long with Marinol as when I smoke marijuana."

But a motion filed by his lawyer to modify his condition of bail to allow him to smoke pot was rejected by a federal magistrate in February and then again in March.

McWilliams says his viral load went from a baseline of 12,500 copies three years ago to 256,000 at last count, with his CD4 cells hovering below 400. Viral resistance to some of his medications has set in, he claims, because he hasn't been able to take them properly.

Life wasn't always such a drag for the 49-year-old writer and owner of Prelude Press publishing company, whose best-selling self-help tomes have included *Life 101* and *Do It! Let's Get Off Our Buts!* Then in March 1996 he was diagnosed with lymphoma and AIDS on the very same day.

“They started me on massive doses of radiation and chemotherapy,” he recalls. “And shortly after that, they began the triple-combination HIV drugs. I was so sick from it all that I thought the medication would kill me before the disease ever did.”

That’s when he started researching the purported benefits of medical marijuana and found that huffing a hooter brought deliverance from the toxic soup simmering in his weakened system.

After working for the November 1996 approval by voters of California’s Proposition 215, providing for legal medical pot, McWilliams met Todd McCormick, another cancer survivor and medical marijuana advocate. McWilliams gave him a contract to write a book on the subject, and began to dole out the $150,000 advance, a portion of which he admits to paying so that McCormick could grow pot. The sum was given in small amounts, often on his personal credit card. “I’m an unorthodox publisher,” he says.

And McCormick’s an unorthodox researcher. He used some of the money to rent a $6,000-a-month house in swank Bel Air and cultivated thousands of pot plants. In July 1997, 50 cops from the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Office and the Drug Enforcement Agency raided McCormick’s home and denounced him on TV as a drug kingpin.

“I immediately responded with a press release saying Todd didn’t get his money from drug sales, but from me,” McWilliams says.

And so, in December, drug agents “paid me a little visit,” he says. Though only a few ounces of pot were found, eight felony counts were filed. McWilliams was arrested and spent a month in jail while his mother and brother put their houses up to make his $250,000 bond.

While McWilliams confirms funding McCormick’s horticultural studies, he says—at best, naively—that his only intention was to distribute medical marijuana to buyers clubs and the pharmacies he expected would sell legal pot after passage of Prop 215. But the vote, blocked by the feds, does nothing for McWilliams.

While awaiting trial, McWilliams has become a cause célèbre. In March even the National Academy of Science’s Institute of Medicine issued a report on the possible usage of marijuana in the treatment of PWAs. (See “Sense and Sinsemilla”).

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