How Early AIDS Activists Contributed to Today's Cannabis Craze

A look at pioneers who worked to provide medical marijuana to their communities, including folks with HIV and cancer

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In the early decades of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, especially before the advent of modern treatment, people living with the virus often turned to marijuana for its health benefits. Pot could help them manage nausea and hold down food or simply relax. Problem was, marijuana was illegal. And so a number of AIDS pioneers fought to legalize medical marijuana.

In an article titled "How San Francisco's HIV/AIDS warriors paved the way for today's cannabis gold rush," the San Francisco Chronicle profiles Mary Jane Rathbun—aka "Brownie Mary"—and Dennis Peron.

Peron, who died in 2018, founded the Cannabis Buyers' Club in 1996, modeling it after the local AIDS Drug Buyers' Club of the time. He had made a name for himself selling pot in the 1970s and '80s, and when the AIDS epidemic hit, many folks turned to him. Peron understood the need firsthand: His partner, Jonathan West, died of AIDS-related illness in 1990, shortly after a police raid on their home. Afterward, Peron dedicated himself to the issue of legalizing medical marijuana.

Similarly, Rathbun had been supplementing her income by selling pot in the form of marijuana brownies. After getting arrested in 1981, she was sentenced to community service. "Through her volunteer work," the newspaper writes, "she came to care for some of the first San Franciscans dying from AIDS. She adopted people with AIDS as her "kids" and dedicated her life to baking marijuana brownies to help them with their illnesses. Dennis Peron later estimated that, at her peak, Rathbun was giving away 1,600 brownies a month." She died in 1999.

Rathbun, Peron and other San Francisco advocates spoke out publicly for legal access to pot. They educated lawmakers and gathered signatures to change existing law and prejudice, laying the groundwork for today's marijuana boon.

For more about Peron, read the 2018 write-up in POZ's sister publication Cancer Health titled "R.I.P. Medical Marijuana Pioneer Dennis Peron."

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