

The World's Biggest PC (Pro-Cannabis) Rally

In what European country do people smoke more marijuana, per capita, than in the U.S.?

No, it's not Holland, it's the Czech Republic. Travel writer Rick Steves threw that surprising fact into his talk Sunday at the Seattle Hempfest. He had just come back from two months in Europe where, he said, "a joint causes as much excitement as a can of beer. It's just not a big deal."

Steves lives in nearby Edmonds, WA, from whence he runs his flourishing guidebook business.



Rick Steves

Is there any public figure in America who risks more, career-wise, by openly challenging the marijuana prohibition? "I've got to be careful not to overplay my hand," he said, "but everybody in public television knows what I'm doing and they're with me."

The Seattle Hempfest—the world's biggest pro-cannabis rally by far—developed out of a 1991 vigil in a local park opposing the Gulf War. Opposition to the current catastrophe in Iraq was expressed at this year's event by the very visible Ron-Paul-for-President crew. There was also a booth at which Fred Miller of Peace Action of Washington disseminated info about U.S. military spending.

Miller's routine is called "Incredible Feats of Stupidity" and highlights Pentagon programs such as the one that provided landlocked Zimbabwe with anti-submarine rockets. Miller's partner, Gabrielle Lavalle, wore a little crown on her blonde bouffant wig and a powder-blue dress with a sash across her chest that said "I Miss America."

The 16th annual Hempfest was held August 18-19 in Myrtle Edwards Park, a mile-long strip of greenery along Elliott Bay. Vendors' booths—this year there were almost 300—line a couple of winding asphalt pathways. Tents and stages are set up where the lawn widens. Speakers are interspersed with bands. The Seattle Post-Intelligencer (which had a booth offering subscriptions at a deep discount along with a free toolbelt) estimated the two-day crowd at 150,000. It rained fairly hard for about 15 minutes on Saturday and nobody paid it any mind. That's Seattle for you. Sunday there was a soft drizzle for most of the morning, then the sun came out.

The hemp-loving masses thronging through the narrow park were mainly young adults, so-called "recreational users." Jeff Hergenrather, MD, was struck by how youthful and able-bodied the crowd seemed compared to the patients he sees in Sonoma County.

It's unlikely that his colleague Tom O'Connell would have had the same take. O'Connell contends that young adults who use cannabis regularly are self-medicating for anxiety and depression. A large percentage of people at the

Hempfest were in their 20s, working at entry-level jobs. In a system that enables very few to make a secure living, this is reason enough for anxiety and depression.

A decade ago at a hemp event you'd see lots of classy-looking people in draw-string pants. Now you see the working-class youth in t-shirts proclaiming "Wake and Bake," or "Jesus is coming, better roll another joint," or "Harry Pothead" (with a drawing of the young wizard smoking one).

Memorable speakers included a middle-aged woman named Nora Callahan, leader of the November Coalition, which supports prisoners of the drug war. As Callahan tells it, "My brother was arrested and charged in a drug conspiracy at the end of the 1980s. On words of 'cooperators'—snitches—he was convicted in federal court and sentenced to 27 years in prison. That's when I found out that the phony war on drugs is a real war on people, and has no chance at creating a drug-free America."

"We have a secret policing system in this country that relies on snitches instead of doing real investigations. They have quotas and have to make so many arrests in order to keep their jobs." —Nora Callahan

Callahan described the recent murder by Atlanta police of a 92-year-old Black woman whose house they raided on a tip from a confidential informant. "We have a secret policing system in this country



Panelists Debby Goldsberry of the Berkeley Patients Group; Chuck Armsbury, editor of the Razor Wire, a prisoners' journal; Nora Callahan of the November Coalition; Seattle attorney Doug Hiatt; and Rainee and Bruce Osman. The Osmans were busted for legal cultivation at their home in Kent, WA, based on information elicited by Washington State Patrol troopers from their 8-year-old daughter just after she had seen her grandfather crushed by a truck.

that relies on snitches instead of doing real investigations. They have quotas and have to make so many arrests in order to keep their jobs. When my brother was arrested I was changed forever. I will never trust the government again and that's not a good thing because the government is 'mine' and not trusting it is like not trusting yourself."

"The thing that has moved the doctors along is their patients."

On the doctors' panel David Bearman, MD, reported that there are now 60 MDs in the Santa Barbara area who have approved marijuana use by their regular patients, and three who will issue approvals to patients for whom they don't provide primary care. "The thing that has moved the doctors along is their patients, whom they know are sick, telling them that marijuana helps them. They've also been noticing that many of these patients are doing better although they're using less prescription medicine." This steady rise in the number of Cali-

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fornians seeking approvals and doctors issuing them continues despite intermittent DEA raids on growers and dispensaries.

Frank Lucido, MD, of Berkeley, recounted how he came to monitor meetings of the Medical Board of California after being investigated (and ultimately cleared) by the board in 2001. Lucido had approved cannabis use by "a 16-about-to-be-17-year-old with severe attention deficit disorder" who had been having problems academically and socially. Cannabis enabled him to get A's and make friends. Lucido believes that doctors who conduct appropriate exams have little to fear from the medical board at this point. "I thank the doctors with low practice standards for taking the heat off us," he said facetiously.

Several of the MDs in attendance, including Lucido, Hergenrather and Greg Carter of Seattle, discussed the formation of a new doctors' group that would promote high practice standards and continuing medical education programs. Sunil Aggarwal, an MD/PhD student at the University of Washington agreed to help organize the group, which will be called the American Academy of Cannabinoid Medicine.

At the end of a panel of lobbyists, Rob Kampia of the Marijuana Policy Project commented on the recent defeat of the Hinchey-Rohrabacher amendment. The measure would have defunded DEA raids on growers and dis-



tributors in the medical marijuana states. Kampia's MPP had donated to many a Congressperson's PAC to push Hinchey-Rohrabacher—they even paid odious Bob Barr of Georgia \$10,000/month—but the costly effort failed to garner more than two additional votes. Kampia said that in the period ahead MPP would spend more money on "grassroots" efforts. By which he meant picking districts in which Congresspersons might be swayed, and then paying off "people like leading clergymen and college presidents" to help sway them.

An Organizational Miracle
No one owns the Hempfest, no impresario's name is attached to it, there are no profits for anyone to take home. Funding comes from the vendors (a basic booth costs \$420), sponsors who take ads in the program, and \$5 donations solicited at the entrance. Planning and staging the event involves a miraculous collective effort.

This glimpse of how it's done comes from Peter Henry, the man in charge of trash removal: "Most of the year, while the rest of the 'core staff' attend monthly meetings, I'm off in my own world teaching high school. I get involved a few weeks prior to the Fest by organizing recycling con-



Satirist Gabrielle Lavalle

ainers (which the city provides for free) and trash dumpsters (which we pay through the nose for), then a friend of mine and I work like dogs through the festival until the park is cleaned up.

"Most crew leaders recruit their friends to help them out, and most crews are perpetually short-handed. My situation isn't the best—after all how exciting can you make it sound to pick up trash? Hempfest relies on many walk-up volunteers. 'Here's a shirt, here's a bag, here's some gloves, now go out and pick up trash.' Many of these folks may live marginally, but they still want to help. I remember going home one year at 1 a.m. on Saturday night, the ground covered in litter. It had all been picked up the next morning by an army of street kids. On Monday and Tuesday we might find people helping clean up the park who haven't even been to the event. They see what we're doing and they just pitch in.

"Nobody is paid. Some of the bands get a travel allowance but it isn't exactly princely. Lots of core members put in hundreds of dollars of their own money to make it happen. And the miracle is, each year it comes off and we leave the park as clean as we found it."

The Hempfest's goals are explicitly political. Vivian McPeak, a prime mover since 1991, quotes Gandhi: "First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win." McPeak adds, "Hempfest exists so that they will never be able to ignore us, and its excellence comes so that they can not laugh at us. We educate our attendees so that as they fight with us, we will know how to win."

Share kept the books

Hempfest staff are still mourning the death of Share Parker, a super organizer who handled their finances for many years. She died of cancer in December 2006. The program stated, "Tall and resolute, dreadlocked to the ground, she dedicated her life to Hempfest. She questioned every bill and secured most everything we needed from insurance to toilets." Share kept time as well as the books—she played bass for the Hempfest house band, the Herbivores.



The hemp-loving masses in Seattle, undaunted by drizzle.



photos: paul von hartman