

*club. That day I signed up the first person, a total stranger with a piece of paper that said, 'I've got AIDS'... I had sold pot before, but you at least had to know somebody who knew somebody. I sold it to that total stranger and I knew I was starting down a road that I didn't know where it would end."*

He also wrote another ballot proposition, which would restore hemp to the list of approved medicines. San Francisco's Proposition P passed with 80% of the vote and Peron carried that success to other cities across the state, slowly but surely building momentum and successes for what was now being called the "Medical Marijuana Movement."

The federal government raided and closed the Cannabis Buyers Club in 1996, which had over the course of six years, and several name changes, provided marijuana to 14,000 people who had a note from their doctors stating cannabis would benefit them medically. As always, Peron had a response. He co-wrote a statewide medical marijuana initiative and mobilized his friends and allies to get it on the ballot. That fall, California voters passed Peron's Proposition 215, the first statewide medical marijuana law in American history. Since its passage, 13 other states and the District of Columbia have enacted their own medical marijuana laws.

It is Peron's proudest achievement: *"I managed, in the middle of the war on drugs, in the belly of the beast, to serve these people; and I turned the most powerless people in the world into the most powerful force in America. I mobilized them to change the world, and we did."*

Peron was now the face of medical marijuana in California and, by extension, the country. His vision and action led to the ability of hundreds of thousands of Americans to treat their ailments with cannabis. Proposition 215 changed the face of marijuana advocacy from the stoner hippie stereotype to the cancer patient, and in doing so altered the public's perception of pot. Thanks to Peron's long, tireless advocacy, marijuana had become more than just a vice. It was now considered medicine by a growing number of people.

His work was far from over, however. Unwilling to accept the will of the people, California Attorney General Dan Lundgren enthusiastically cooperated with federal authorities in raid after raid on medical marijuana grows, dispensaries and even patients' homes.

Peron responded in 1998 by challenging Lundgren to the Republican nomination for California Attorney General. He was never destined to win, but he sent the

message that the people had spoken and they would not go down without a fight.

In a string of busts and court cases, Peron spent the 90's fighting many of the legal battles that defined medical marijuana law in California, opening the doors to an industry that now serves more than half a million patients across the state. He made many of the personal sacrifices that make California the most cannabis-friendly state in the U.S.

So why is he opposed to the initiative this fall that would make marijuana growth, possession and use legal for anyone over the age of 21 in California?

*"They threw the right wing some bones. If you smoke in front of a child—and a child is now 18 to 20 years old—it's a felony. That's just what we need: more felonies for marijuana."* The proposed law would also place limits on marijuana grows (25 square feet) and limit possession to one ounce, which Peron argues will only give the police more reason to harass and arrest marijuana users.

Supporters of the initiative point to the provision exempting medical patients from the law's exemptions, but Peron is unconvinced.

*"You know how Prop 215 is pretty ambiguous? They can use [the ballot measure] down the road to 'clarify' Prop 215. They will use it as a guideline."*

Peron's fears may be well-placed. Proposition 215 has been an ever-changing legal minefield, with new court decisions changing the way the law is enforced on what sometimes seems like a monthly basis. A "clear signal" from the voters on such contentious issues as grow sizes and consumption in the presence of minors could make felons of medical patients and spell the end of California's small growers.

And then there's the tax: in a year when others in the cannabis legalization movement are banking on the allure of tax revenues to convince voters to support legalization, Peron is adamant: *"It's medicine. You don't tax medicine."*

But that isn't Peron's main objection. From the moment he stepped off the bus in San Francisco in 1967 to the present day, Dennis Peron has devoted his life to the fight for personal freedom and dignity. So he is especially upset at what he perceives to be the sheepish stance taken by the initiative's authors.

*"They seem to be almost embarrassed about marijuana,"* says Peron, citing the provisions banning smoking marijuana outdoors, smoking in the presence of minors, marijuana sales near schools and community centers, and specifically making the marijuana "age of consent" the same as that of

alcohol. These provisions reinforce the idea that smoking marijuana is a "vice," rather than a legitimate form of medical care, and they deny patients the right to use their medicine with dignity.

*"There is no such thing as a 'recreational user,'"* as he is fond of saying. *"Ask a regular person why they smoke marijuana. They'll say, 'I get high', right? Well, let's get deeper than that. 'It makes me feel better'. That is a medical reason."*

*"I use it for depression,"* Peron continues. *"I haven't had a drink in 30 years. I'm depressed at this world around us, where people are predators and victim, and marijuana helps me with my depression. If that's not a medical reason, I don't know what is."*

Peron has experienced too much in his rich life to accept the return of marijuana to the seedy side of town. He lost the love of his life and all of his closest friends to AIDS, and he saw how much better their lives were when they had access to cannabis. (Peron has never tested positive for HIV, contrary to some reports.) He made it his life's work to care for those who cannot care for themselves - the Cannabis Buyer's Club housed over 100 people stricken with AIDS during the years when 2,000 people were dying from the disease every month - and he is not going to see all the work he has done legitimizing cannabis as medicine go to waste without a fight.

Peron knows he is not popular for saying such things, but that doesn't diminish the enthusiasm with which medical marijuana patients flock to have their picture taken with him when we meet again at the First Annual Medical Cannabis Cup in San Francisco. He's a celebrity here, and he is enjoying every moment of it.

But hang around him long enough and you'll notice something else: everyone who interrupts him to shake his hand, snap a photo or just say "thank you" gets the same, full interest and attention that he gives to his close friends. No one ever seems to get the brush-off from him, even when everyone wants a moment of his time.

It's a small glimpse into the apparently bottomless stores of generosity that have fueled him from that first toke way back in the Summer of Love. All these years later, the commitment he made in his youth to care for people still animates him. He looks forward to a future when people will be completely free to use cannabis: *"I don't know what's going to happen in November. If people want to be free, we'll know. We can't have this partial freedom."*