

Volunteer crusades for cannabis and voters

■ Activist John Walsh, co-founder of the Eugene Cannabis Liberation Society, works tirelessly

By Lisa Toth
Oregon Daily Emerald

You walk past him daily, but you were probably too busy to notice the friendly smile from a man dressed in a red flannel shirt and wide-rimmed glasses. With a box of chewing tobacco shoved in his coat pocket, political activist and dedicated volunteer John Walsh actually has much more to offer students than meets the eye.

Many know him only for his petition to legalize marijuana, but from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. three days a week, Walsh sits patiently behind a table in the EMU getting students to register to vote.

His spirit of activism was sparked in 1979, when Walsh worked in Providence, R.I., for the Coalition for Consumer Justice, Providence Housing Authority and the Green Party, which is dedicated to peace, civil rights and environmental protection.

Walsh's work with the Green Party brought him to Eugene in 1989. Until April of 1997, he spent countless hours walking from house to house, to alert community members about the power they have to sign initiatives and become involved in political campaigns.

Walsh continued his public work as the current co-founder and vice-president of the Eugene Cannabis Liberation Society. CLS president and co-founder Dan Koozer described Walsh as "the anchorperson of the group. Everything we do wouldn't be possible without him."

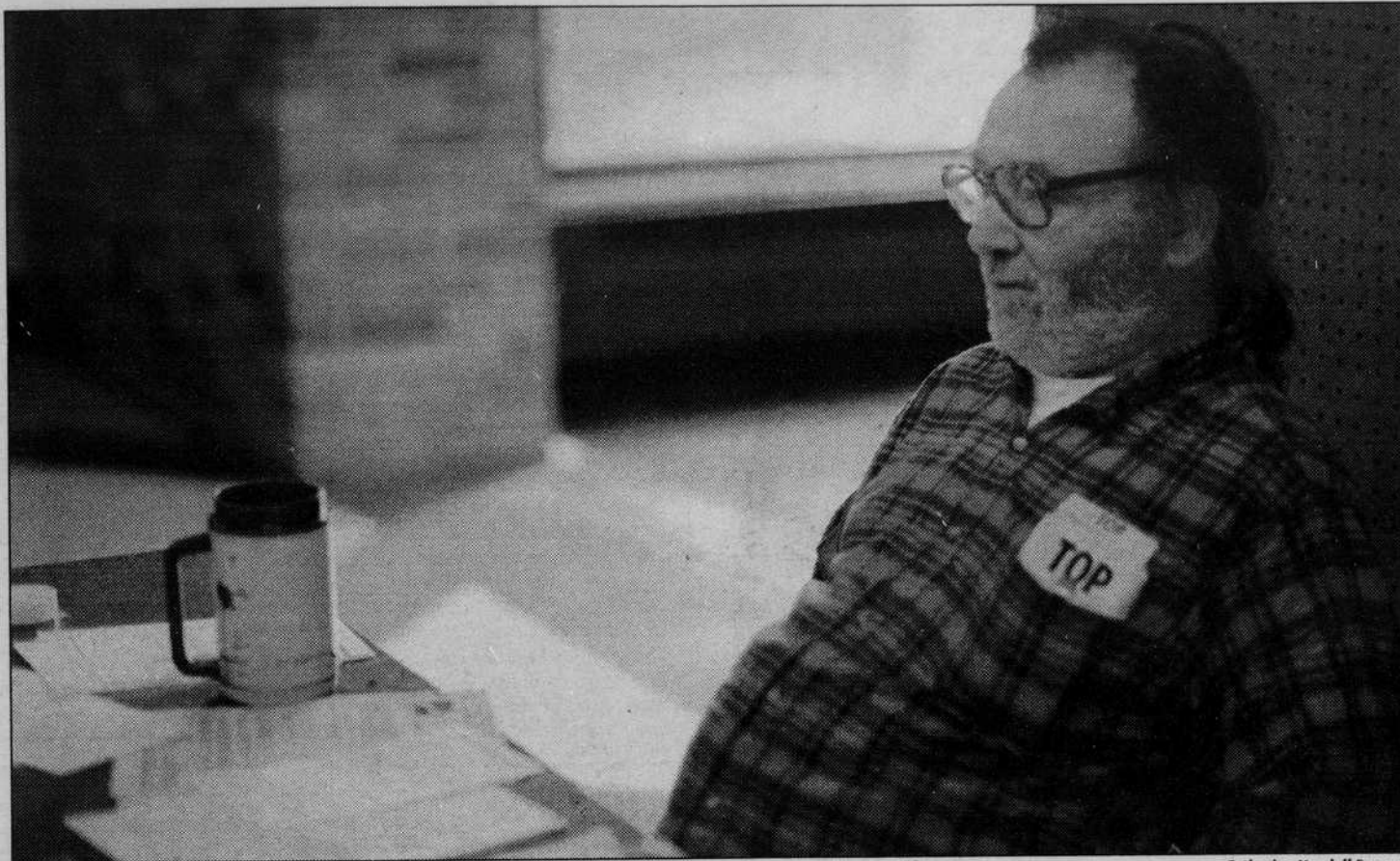
The CLS group, which consists of six members, uses tactics such as signs, booths and talking to students to make a difference in important issues that range far beyond the marijuana debate, such as the upcoming presidential elections.

Walsh said that in the national student newsletter, published by the United States Students Association, 45 percent of voter population fell under the age range of 18-34. "But only six percent were actually registered to vote in that age group," Walsh said.

The USSA is a national organization committed to providing better access to education for students.

Walsh also explained that people between the ages of 18-34 are often classified as "functionally illiterate." This means they do not have completely developed reading and writing skills. According to the Literacy Volunteers of America Web site, one in five American adults — 30 million people — are functionally illiterate. The number of illiterate adults exceeds, by 16 million, the entire voter turnout for President Reagan in the 1980 election.

The CLS, which was originally formed in January of 1996, will set up a table at the Freedom Plaza on April 1 at the Saturday Market and at county fairs to offer people the opportunity to register to vote.



Catharine Kendall Emerald

Activist John Walsh, co-founder of the Eugene Cannabis Liberation Society, voices his opinions while trying to get people to register to vote on the main floor of the EMU.

"Public education explains our position to the community," Koozer said.

Walsh is working in an environment where many students want to be educated about the issues but don't know where to find information.

"I feel I am obligated to vote. But I don't feel my vote can make a difference because of the majority. I don't want to sit down and read a long list of ballot measures," undeclared freshman Marie Malpass said. She explained that if she knew more about the issues, she would be more encouraged to vote.

The CLS provides that link to information. Walsh said he is willing to answer questions. To increase membership in the CLS, Walsh said the members are trying to get people to participate in the Medical Marijuana Law, passed in 1998. Once they pay \$150 per year, patients are issued a card, which allows them to receive treatment for special conditions.

Walsh is a firm advocate for a conference that will take place in Salem on March 20. The conference will decide whether or not to add seven conditions, including schizophrenia, Alzheimer's disease and STDs to the program.

Right now, the CLS is working to restart the dormant Hemp Education Network.

"The group has been defunct since the 1994-95 school year, but we want to change that," said freshman landscape and architecture major Aaron Reddick.

Two other initiatives addressed by these groups are the Oregon Cannabis Taxation Act and the Oregon Personal Privacy amendment, which are current being debated in the Legislature. Both would help private citizens own and use marijuana in their homes.

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Calendar

Thursday, March 9

The documentary "A Place Called Chiapas" will be shown at 7 p.m. in 177 Lawrence Hall. Sponsored by the Committee In Solidarity with the Central American People.

The Oregon Homecrafters Association's 16th Annual Spring Arts and Crafts Show and Sale will be held at The Lane County Home and Garden Show at the Lane County Fairgrounds from 5 p.m. to 10 p.m.