

The Dope on Cannabis

Continued from page 17

Bainbridge Island in Washington, agrees: "Of the 70 members we've served so far, between 85 and 95 percent are people with AIDS. I've had people say to me, 'I can't eat. I've lost 40 pounds in two weeks, please help me.' And I do."

The 52-year-old McKee, who uses cannabis to treat a spinal-cord injury she sustained several years ago, says she started her club after watching a television program about CBCs. "The program said there was a buyers' club in Seattle, so I went looking for it, to no avail. I left my name and number at a few places in the city, and people began calling me."

For two years McKee provided cannabis to her members who lived in Beaverton, Ore., Vancouver, B.C., and points in between. Two weeks ago, she got busted. "The West Sound Narcotics Enforcement Team—which is funded by the federal government and oversees three counties on the peninsula—came after me after they found documents and cannabis at another grower's home." A legal defense fund has been set up to assist McKee, who faces felony drug charges.

For his part, Brown says, "We may be breaking the laws, but we're also trying to change them."

So each week Brown hops into his 1987 Toyota truck to make home deliveries to his members. "We only do home deliveries right now. I'm looking for a central location, preferably a space in downtown Portland, where our club's members can meet on a regular basis." He journeys across Portland and sometimes out to Hillsboro. Members may receive up to 4.5 grams twice a week, though some only use that amount every six weeks or so. He never

"There are a substantial number of people who grow cannabis in the Portland area," says T.D. Miller, who last year founded the Portland chapter of NORML.

Miller met Brown a few months ago, when the two went to Salem to testify against the re-criminalization bills. "We totally support what Marc is doing. It's unconscionable that people have to suffer the way they do. At least 80 percent of the public thinks that cannabis should legally be available for medicinal purposes."

"I have learned there is a very active hemp movement in Oregon," says Brown, who recently spoke about the Portland buyer's club at a PDX NORML meeting. "A lot of people care deeply about this issue and have agreed to supply cannabis at cost, or even donate it. That's so important for people who need medicinal cannabis, because many times they're living on their measly [Social Security] checks from month to month."

Miller estimates one ounce of commercial-grade high-quality marijuana costs between \$250 and \$350, and Brown says he's often able to purchase that amount for \$150 or less. "This is a relationship built totally on trust," Brown says. "Totally."

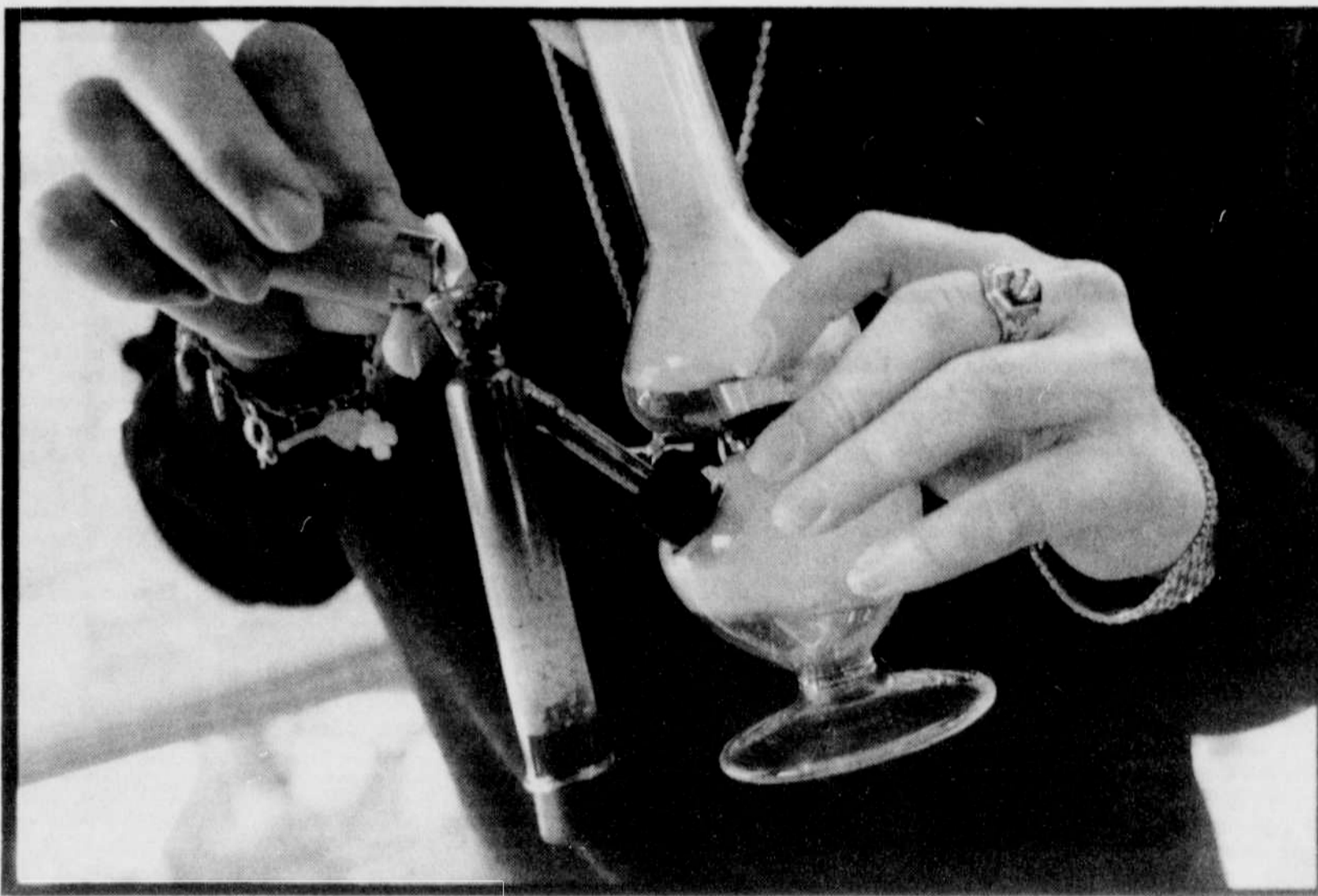
Brown describes how the CBC conducts its work:

We have a supplier. He cuts a plant, and I pick it up, clean it, and separate the buds from the leaf. I weigh the bud, for which we're typically charged about \$150 per ounce. I may get 2 or 3 ounces of bud from the plant. I then sterilize the cannabis—this is really important when you're talking about using cannabis for people with suppressed immune systems. The cannabis can mold, so I bake it [275 degrees for 15 minutes] or boil it in a bag for 15 minutes. Then I package it up in 4.5-gram amounts. I have a set schedule with members, and I take just five packets with me on my rounds, because if you're caught delivering more, it's a felony. If it's a new member, we'll meet somewhere, usually at the person's home. I spend about an hour—it really is like client intake—and talk about their illness and their symptoms and why they think cannabis may be good for them. Then we'll smoke some cannabis.

He says, "One of our members has multiple sclerosis, which makes him twitch terribly. Within two hits you can see how he relaxes and the twitches stop."

I know there are a lot of people out there who are in pain, but they do have options when it comes to alternative treatments," says David Eisen, director of Portland's Addiction Acupuncture Center, a licensed alcohol and drug rehabilitation facility and HIV clinic offering alternative health care. "We can use nutritional supplements, massage and acupuncture to help AIDS patients. Many of these treatments are free for people who come to this clinic, thanks to the Ryan White CARE Act."

Though Eisen admits some people may benefit from medicinal



cannabis, he harbors concerns about the drug's potential harmfulness: "Many people with AIDS suffer from pneumonia. Taking hot smoke into your lungs further weakens the lungs. Many people with AIDS also suffer with bouts of dementia, and we know that marijuana can adversely affect memory."

Some critics of medicinal cannabis say people can also use Marinol, a synthetic form of THC—the most active ingredient in marijuana—which has been approved by the federal Food and Drug Administration as a treatment for nausea and wasting syndrome. But Brown and many other people with HIV/AIDS say it simply does not work as well as marijuana.

"From a consumer standpoint, there is a real interest in medicinal marijuana among people with HIV and AIDS," says 56-year-old Jack Cox, editor of a newsletter called "The Metro HIV Advocacy Council." According to Cox, the forum is essentially a consumer tool, one where services and products designed for people with HIV/AIDS are discussed (other matters are also addressed in the one-year-old newsletter, which has a statewide circulation of about 120). He says, "I think there is a relief among many that the CBC is now up and running."

"Sure, we've heard about the club," says Susan Stoltenberg, executive director of Cascade AIDS Project, Oregon's largest non-medical service organization for people with HIV/AIDS. "We don't refer our clients to the club for obvious legal reasons, but we're certainly supportive of people exploring their options."

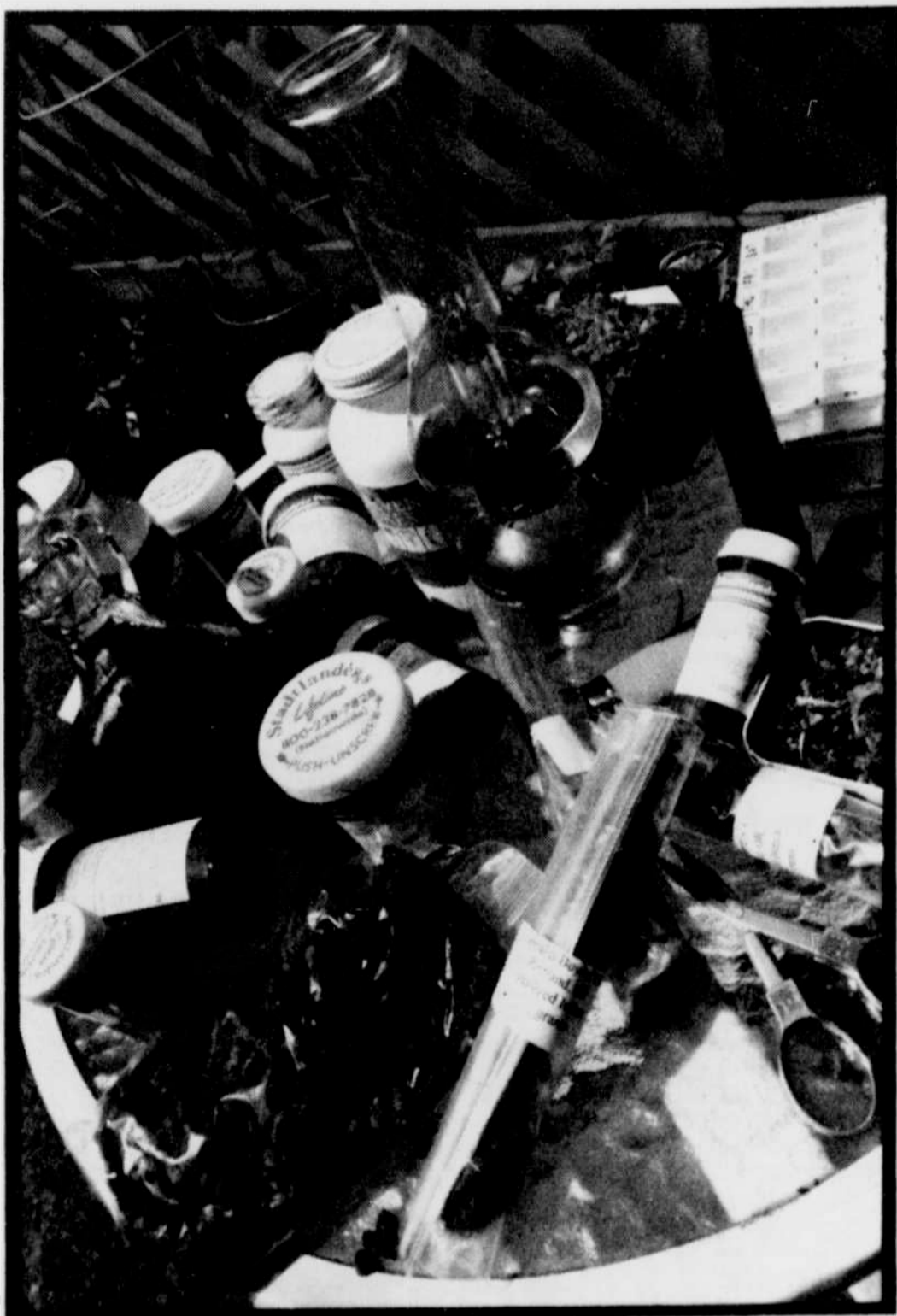
Brown says he suspects the Portland buyers' club will continue to grow as more people find out about it, and he says his immediate goal is to find a central location where the club can meet. Brown also intends to lobby policymakers in all levels of government for legalization of medicinal cannabis.

Forty-six-year-old Laird Funk of Williams, Ore., has unsuccessfully pushed for such a measure (via the initiative process and by lobbying the Legislature) for a decade. Nevertheless, he says he will keep trying. "We tried to get a bill through this year, but this Legislature in particular doesn't want to deal with it because they want to be viewed as totally anti-drug. It doesn't seem to matter to the leadership that the public overwhelmingly supports medical marijuana."

Brown says he plans to ask the Portland City Council, perhaps as early as next month, to take action on this issue, and another campaign is underway to put a medicinal marijuana legalization initiative on the November 1996 general election ballot.

"As much as some politicians would like this issue to go away, it's simply not going to—because lives are at stake," says Brown.

For more information about the Portland Cannabis Buyers' Club, call 281-4602; or write to CBC Portland, 2600 NE Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd., Suite 119, Portland, OR 97212. If you would like to contribute to Joanna McKee's defense fund, write to The Green Cross Legal Fund, 30th Floor, Smith Tower, 509 Second Ave., Seattle, WA 98104.



Marc Brown's own arsenal of medications and supplements

carries more than an ounce (equal to about 28 grams) with him, and he doesn't technically sell cannabis to his members.

"If people can make a donation, that's great: a donation of \$30 or \$40 per 4.5 grams. If people want to donate more, that's wonderful. If they have no money, we give it to them for free. This isn't about money. This is about relieving people's pain," Brown says.