

*As other states move to defelonize drug possession, Oregon still has harsh marijuana laws on the books. Drug Policy Alliance's Ellen Flenniken discusses drug reform in our state and worldwide.*



PHOTO BY DIEGO DIAZ

*Ellen Flenniken is deputy director of development at Drug Policy Alliance, the nation's leading drug reform organization.*

## Where Oregon stands in the drug war

**BY EMILY GREEN**  
STAFF WRITER

Ellen Flenniken grew up in the small, rural town of Brenham, about halfway between Austin and Houston in the heart of East Texas bluebonnet country.

Her parents were criminal defense attorneys, and later her father became a district court judge. When they couldn't find child care, they brought their gregarious daughter with them to court.

As a little girl, Flenniken watched American justice Texas style as it played out before her in the nation's incarceration capital. She still has memories of inmates in orange jumpsuits, shackled together, being led past her into the courtroom.

As a Caucasian with a well-to-do upbringing, she said, she would watch "as other people's lives were ruined" from her seat at the outer fringes of a system she perceived as harsh and unforgiving.

She eventually left Texas, first landing in Vermont, where she graduated from Middlebury College with a bachelor's degree in political science and Mandarin. Then she set her sights on Portland, moving here in 2008. She worked on Barack Obama's presidential campaign, as U.S. Rep. Suzanne Bonamici's (D-Oregon) campaign manager, and as the deputy finance director at Oregon United for Marriage.

When she was offered the opportunity to work on Measure 91, Oregon's recreational marijuana ballot measure, she saw it as a first step toward fixing the broken criminal justice system she became so familiar with as a child.

After Measure 91's success, Flenniken was hired on as deputy director of development at Drug Policy Alliance, a national organization aimed at ending the

worldwide drug war through criminal justice reform and the advancement of harm reduction.

With an annual budget of \$14 million and offices in five states, it's the nation's leading drug reform organization.

It was the largest financial backer of Measure 91, and since then, it's had its hand in legislation to make Oregon's marijuana laws retroactive.

Drug Policy Alliance also played an integral role in campaigns to legalize recreational marijuana in Colorado, Washington, Alaska, Washington, D.C. and Uruguay.

Street Roots sat down with the 28-year-old Flenniken hours before she hopped in a truck to drive cross-country to her new home in Manhattan, where she'll be working out of Drug Policy Alliance's national headquarters. She was the alliance's only employee stationed in Oregon.

**Emily Green:** *The U.N. had a General Assembly Special Session on the World Drug Problem in April. Can you explain what Drug Policy Alliance had hoped would come of it, and what actually came of it?*

**Ellen Flenniken:** It was the first time since the 1998 U.N. General Assembly special session (UNGASS) that there's been such a momentous international convening on the war on drugs.

In 1998, it took place under the slogan "A Drug Free World: We Can Do It." That reveals the approach toward it 20 years ago, and we had hoped that there would be some acknowledgement of the failure of our punitive approaches to the drug war and the lack of science and health-based policy approaches. Unfortunately, that did not

occur.

This UNGASS was called for by the presidents of Colombia, Mexico and Guatemala, largely because their countries are some of those that have borne the greatest burden of this war. Mexico has lost 80,000 lives – that's 80,000 people who have lost their lives due to the drug war.

The UNGASS was a three-day session, and it adopted the outcome document – which was drafted in Vienna a month earlier – on the first morning, which just slammed the door and basically did away with any illusions that we had that there would be some substantial debate on approaches to drug policy.

**E.G.:** *What did that outcome document contain?*

**E.F.:** There were some acknowledgements of human rights, and some elements of harm reduction. However, there was no mention of decriminalization and no condemnation of the death penalty for drug offenses.

One of the biggest things that came out of UNGASS was this public letter that my colleagues put together, which was addressed to the U.N. Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon, urging them to take a serious look at the failures of our past approach and consider a new approach to drug policy. It was signed by both of the Democratic presidential candidates, Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders; even (Patriots' quarterback) Tom Brady signed it, Richard Branson and Warren Buffett. Having all these leaders, not just from the United States, but from around the world, come together and acknowledge our failure and

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