

Strategy, Timing Key to States' Marijuana Legalization

Washington and Colorado offered fertile ground for legalization advocates

By Gene Johnson
The Associated Press

SEATTLE (AP) — In the late-1980s heyday of the anti-drug "Just Say No" campaign, a man calling himself "Jerry" appeared on a Seattle talk radio show to criticize U.S. marijuana laws.

An esteemed businessman, he hid his identity because he didn't want to offend customers who — like so many in those days — viewed marijuana as a villain in the ever-raging "war on drugs."

Now, a quarter century later, "Jerry" is one of the main forces behind Washington state's successful initiative to legalize pot for adults over 21. And he no longer fears putting his name to the cause: He's Rick Steves, the travel guru known for his popular guidebooks.

"It's amazing where we've come," says Steves of the legalization measures Washington and Colorado voters approved last month. "It's almost counterculture to oppose us."

A once-unfathomable notion, the lawful possession and private use of pot, becomes an American reality this week when this state's law goes into effect. Thursday is "Legalization Day" here, with a tote-your-own-ounce celebration scheduled beneath Seattle's Space Needle — a nod to the measure allowing adults to possess up to an ounce of pot. Colorado's law is set to take effect by Jan. 5.

How did we get here? From "say no" to "yes" votes in not one but two states?

The answer goes beyond society's evolving views, and growing acceptance, of marijuana as a drug of choice.

In Washington — and, advocates hope, coming soon to a state near you — there was a well-funded and cleverly orchestrated campaign that took advantage of deep-pocketed backers, a tweaked pro-pot message and improbable big-name supporters.

Good timing and a growing national weariness over failed drug laws didn't hurt, either.

"Maybe ... the dominoes fell the way they did because they were waiting for somebody to push them in that direction," says Alison Holcomb, the campaign manager for Washington's measure.

Washington and Colorado, both culturally and politically, offered fertile ground for legalization advocates — Washington for its liberal politics, Colorado for its libertarian streak, and both for their Western independence.

Both also have a history with marijuana law reform. More than a decade ago, they were among the first states to approve medical marijuana.

Still, when it came to full legalization, activists hit a wall. Colorado's voters rejected a measure to legalize up to an ounce of marijuana in 2006. In Washington, organiz-

ers in 2010 couldn't make the ballot with a measure that would have removed criminal penalties for marijuana.

Since the 1970 founding of the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws, reform efforts had centered on the unfairness of marijuana laws to the recreational user -- hardly a sympathetic character, Holcomb notes.

That began to change as some doctors

decade, with Mexico's crackdown on cartels prompting horrific bloodshed there and headlines here, activists could point to a stunning fact: In 1991, marijuana arrests made up less than one-third of all drug arrests in the U.S. Now, they make up half - - about 90 percent for possession of small amounts -- yet pot remains easily available.

"What we figured out is that your average person doesn't necessarily like marijuana, but there's sort of this untapped desire by voters to end the drug war," says Brian Vicente, a Denver lawyer who helped write Colorado's Amendment 64. "If we can focus attention on the fact we can bring in revenue, redirect law enforcement resources and raise awareness instead of focusing on pot, that's a message that works."

With a potentially winning message, the activists needed something else: messengers.

Steves, who lives in the north Seattle suburb of Edmonds, was a natural choice -- the "believable, likeable nerd," as he calls himself. Known for his public television and radio shows, as well as his "Europe through the Back Door" guide books, he openly advocated in 2003 for a measure that made marijuana the lowest priority for Seattle police.

He already knew Holcomb, who had been the drug policy director at the American

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extolled marijuana's ability to relieve pain, quell nausea and improve the appetites of cancer and AIDS patients. The conversation shifted in the 1990s toward medical marijuana laws. But even in some states with those laws, including Washington, truly sick people continued to be arrested.

Improved data collection that began with the ramping up of the drug war in the 1980s also helped change the debate. Late last

See OUNCE on page 10

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