

# Constance Gee Describes Her Exile From Academia

Constance Bumgarner Gee told her personal story in brief outline at the NORML conference and tells it in detail in her just published memoir, *Higher Education: Marijuana at the Mansion*. (Her last name is pronounced with a hard G, as in clarified-butter ghee)

While married to the president of Vanderbilt University, E. Gordon Gee, Constance developed Meniere’s Disease (an ear disorder that causes vertigo and severe nausea). She discovered through a friend that marijuana provided relief, and smoked on rare occasions when her retching became unbearable. She was squealed on by a member of the house staff who had it in for her. (Fans of the BBC show *Downton Abbey* will appreciate Gee’s account of life at Braeburn, the Vanderbilt chancellor’s residence.)

You don’t have to be a pot partisan, a Meniere’s patient, or intrigued by the politics of Academe to dig this book. I couldn’t help putting checkmarks in the margins on many a page.

Constance Bumgarner grew up middle-class in a mid-sized town, Burlington, North Carolina. She was not a troublemaker, but one elementary school teacher discerned uppity tendencies.

- “Resents authority” was scribbled across the comment section of my report card. All I could think of when I read her comment was ‘Doesn’t everybody?’”

- “The British fashion model Twiggy was my saving grace in terms of body image through adolescence. I had the same big eyes, and as a high school junior I cropped my hair short like hers. Sure, I looked good in clothes; it was the prospect of being out of them that deflated my sassy, faux self-confidence.”

She left for New York as soon as she could and earned a master’s of fine arts degree at Pratt Institute.

- “MFA in hand I hit the streets to find a job as —what else?— a bartender.”

She went for a PhD at Penn State, won a coveted Getty fellowship, and wrote a dissertation on the National Endowment for the Arts’ educational programs.

She was hired at Ohio State “at the quasi-faculty level of ‘lecturer’ (translation: will work for peanuts with no health benefits)” to create a new graduate program in arts education “at a time when the Ohio Board of Regents was cutting graduate programs statewide so legislators could redirect more of the budget toward prisons.”

When the university president, E. Gordon Gee, held a reception for new faculty, he noticed her. Gee was a widower, about to turn 50. She was 39, unmarried.

- “I was wearing a short, swingy silk cocktail dress in unabashed cadmium yellow. Being a fashion plate in academia is like shooting fish in a barrel —cruelly easy and more than a little demented... I stood out like a sunflower in a vat of oatmeal.”

He courted her.

- Gordon seemed to appreciate my casual reception of his announcement that he was Mormon... The fact was and remains that I don’t much care about a person’s religion, as long as there’s not an oversupply of it.”

They married and were happy for a while. Constance tried hard to get on well with Gordon’s 20-something daughter and to be an appropriate first lady, while building the graduate arts policy program (her #1 job, but not really).

In the spring of ‘95 the University of California Board of Regents tried to lure Gordon Gee away from Ohio State. He was well aware that the Gingrich-led Congress was cutting federal research grants and

student financial aid, and that \$4.8 billion of the \$9.3 billion UC budget came from the feds. And Constance felt committed to building the graduate program at Ohio State.

But running the UC system was the most prestigious job in public education and Gordon decided to accept. When the news of his offer from UC, leaked and Ohio State alumni responded with a mass faxing imploring Gordon to stay. They were successful. Grateful Ohio State raised his salary.

- “The biggest honor was the marching band’s invitation for Gordon and me to ‘dot the i’ at the first football game of the season” (while the musicians spell out the word ‘Ohio.’)”

Dotting the i is an honor usually reserved for a senior sousaphone player. “We were the first to umlaut the ‘i’” Constance points out. (She had spent her junior year of college in Germany.)

It wasn’t long before Brown University started wooing Gordon. He had previously advised his daughter not to go there, calling it “Granola U.” Constance summarizes his politics thus: “Although Gordon is fairly liberal in terms of many social issues (he is pro-choice and has some gay friends who keep a low profile with regard to their sexuality), he is conservative with regard to economic policy and the funding of social welfare programs.” In other words, fairly liberal if the rich/poor thing is not involved. An all too familiar type.

The prestige of running an Ivy League institution was more than Gordon could pass up, and he accepted. His predecessor, Vartan Gregorian, remained active in Brown affairs. At a black-tie fundraising dinner at the Waldorf-Astoria hotel, Vartan gave Constance his “trademark bear hug” and a kiss on the lips.

- “Just as the quick kiss should have ended, he jammed his tongue into my mouth. I was stunned. I pushed him away and literally staggered backward toward the table... When Gordon turned to me after a few minutes of conversing with a dinner companion, I said to him ‘Vartan just stuck his tongue in my mouth.’”

“Gordon look at me quizzically.

“‘I’m serious, Gordon, he just accosted me on the dance floor. I ought to go throw this glass of wine in his face.’”

“‘Don’t make a scene,’ he warned.”

Constance Gee’s tone in *Higher Education* is not at all vengeful —she actually still has love for her ex, and it comes through. This makes her portrayal of the cowardly, bow-tie wearing geek all the more devastating.

Less than two years after the Gees arrived in Rhode Island to preside over Brown, Gordon was offered \$1 million/year by Vanderbilt —an offer he could have refused but did not. In accepting, he violated what Vartan Gregorian called “a certain etiquette among institutions.”

- “Martha Ingram, the chairman of Vanderbilt’s board and chairman and CEO of the mega-conglomerate Ingram Industries, Inc., begged to disagree... ‘I don’t see the difference between the corporate world and the academic world,’ she stated. ‘A university is really a big business, and the chancellor is the CEO.’”

Her descriptions of high-tone Southerners are droll. None funnier than:

- “During our first year on the Nashville white- and black-tie circuit, I asked a friend if she and her husband were going to the Heart Ball. She rolled her

eyes and said ‘No, we just had to draw the line. We don’t go to parties for individual organs.’”

For three years things went well. Constance, who had not wanted to leave Providence for Nashville, found many friends there. With Gordon’s backing, she invited singer-songwriters and others from the music industry to dinners at Braeburn, trying to break down the social barriers between the old Belle Meade establishment that ran Vanderbilt and Nashville’s artistic community.

The first lady’s job involved an enormous amount of work and responsibility.

- “Braeburn averaged 3,000 guests a year for the six years we lived there. We hosted intimate suppers for six, receptions for 300, and everything in between, and we did so five and occasionally six days out of the week. Sunday was the only day decreed off limits; even then, exceptions were made... “We hosted employee celebrations, new and emeritus faculty luncheons and dinners, 25-year alumni reunions, pregame and other sports-related events, faculty and alumni book signings, various university club luncheons and teas, and intimate student gatherings. We hosted patrons parties and other large fundraising events for Nashville’s non-profit organizations... Gordon and I stood at the front door at every event, personally welcoming each guest into the Vanderbilt chancellor’s residence.”

**Growing Accustomed to Being Served**

In addition to being funny, *Higher Education* is laced with sociological insights.

- “Representing the university day in and day out, despite all the perks, is extraordinarily demanding. When a lot is expected of you, you expect a lot from those whose jobs it is to assist you in doing yours. It is easy, almost to the point of inevitability, for someone in such a lofty yet responsibility-laden position to begin to feel entitled. Things are done for you. They have to be done for you in order for you to do your job. But it gets confusing.

“At first the special treatment and kowtowing are embarrassing, but soon it all can become the norm. You begin to expect it, and then you can begin to think you deserve it —after all, you’re working so hard and trying to move so fast. What was once an embarrassment can become a necessity. Service and deference can be both enabling and enjoyable, and both disabling and corrosive.”

- “Sitting on corporate boards can be very lucrative. Gordon was then on the board of five Fortune 500 companies, easily bringing in \$400,000 or more annually in retainer and per-board meeting payments and stock shares.”

In vain, Constance had privately objected to Gordon’s inviting Condoleezza Rice to speak at the Vanderbilt commencement in 2004. Without telling his wife, he decided to give Rice an additional honor, Vanderbilt’s first-ever Chancellors’s Medal for Distinguished Public Service. Constance joined several hundred other Vanderbilt faculty, staff, and students, in signing a letter of protest addressed to Gordon. “We wish to express our dismay over the inappropriate and incomprehensible selection of Dr. Rice for your Public Service award,” it began.

Several members of the Braeburn staff signed the letter, which Constance posted on the mansion’s refrigerator. Gordon, who initially seemed amused, flipped when the organizers of the letter publicized the fact that Constance had signed. He called his wife a dupe (as the higher-ups so often do when their underlings take political action —as if

they had no reason to act, or weren’t smart enough to do so without some radical mas-tmind manipulating them.)

- “Gordon was now suddenly enraged... saying that I had allowed myself to be used by unscrupulous people who wanted to gain media attention. ‘More importantly,’ he yelled, ‘you have jeopardized my career.’”

A few months later, on the night George W. Bush was re-elected, Constance lowered the American flag that flew outside Braeburn to half-staff. An administrator ordered it raised in the morning, and Constance got a scolding.

At this point —November, 2004— she was beginning to experience the onset of Meniere’s disease symptoms: aural pressure, tinnitus, hearing loss in the low-frequency range, and dizziness.

*Constance Gee’s writing about her disease is vivid —and brave,*

## Meniere’s Disease

Constance Gee’s writing about her disease is vivid —and brave, given that she’s a style-conscious woman and Meniere’s involves extreme nausea and vomiting.

- “The vertigo overtook me almost daily. Sometimes I awoke in the middle of the night with my ear screaming and everything spinning around and around. It amazed me that the centrifugal force didn’t sling Gordon out of bed. The attacks came as I was washing my face or applying makeup in the morning or evening, or when I was working at my computer while reading from several documents on my desk. Those activities require head movement and shift of eye focus from close up to farther away, up and down and side to side.

“I tried doing everything in slow motion, but invariably the room would make a quick zigzag, appearing for a split second like a cubist painting. Within a few minutes I would be vomiting, face down, on the floor. These wipeouts are known as ‘drop attacks’ in Meniere’s parlance. The intensity of the pressure and tinnitus would decrease after the drop attack and then build back up over the next few hours... Making it to one’s own bathroom to vomit is the only measure of dignity to which one can aspire during the ferocity of a drop attack.

“The rest of the day or night and sometimes both would be spent in bed drugged up on Valium, Xanax, Zofran, Ativan, or Phenergan —whatever medication various physicians thought would ease the nausea and stop the vertigo.”

Constance lost 17 pounds over the course of a few months. An old friend visited in March 2005. They went for a hike in a state park and Constance soon got sick to her stomach. Her friend “took a small round bonbon tin filled with marijuana and a little wooden pipe out of her backpack. She packed a small amount of the weed into the pipe and handed it to me. I took a couple of draws. The nausea melted away almost immediately. She repacked the pipe, took two hits herself, tapped out the ashes, and handed me the tin and pipe.

“‘Keep this,’ she smiled. ‘It’ll help.’”

“‘Sure does,’ I agreed. The effects seemed miraculous. The nausea was gone.”

Constance told her husband, who responded, “I do not want to know about it!”

- “Hmmm.. He hadn’t said, ‘Don’t do it’—although I probably would have ignored him anyway. He had said he didn’t want to know about it.

She decided not to mention it again to her husband —but then did so several weeks later, en route to a luncheon in honor of Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor.



CONSTANCE GEE

photo by CJ Flanagan



E. Gordon

Constance Gee from previous page



"BRAEBURN," the original name of the residence built in 1914 and purchased by Vanderbilt University in 1960, was resurrected by Constance after she learned its history. She created stationery featuring an ink drawing of the building and explaining in fine type that the name is derived from the Scottish words for slope (brae) and brook (burn). She added, "The original owners, Miss Ida Hood and Miss Susan Heron, both being of Scottish descent, named their home appropriately because of its situation on a sloping hill leading to Richland Creek."

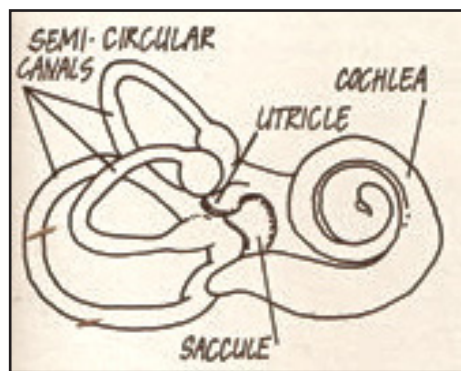
"Other side effects of pot are truthfulness and talkativeness, a potentially dangerous combination," she observes.

Constance had been sick that morning, but she was determined to attend, so she took a few puffs. "Other side effects of pot are truthfulness and talkativeness, a potentially dangerous combination," she observes. Gordon "failed to perceive the humorous absurdity of the situation."

Among those to whom Constance revealed that she used marijuana to cope with nausea was a specialist at Johns Hopkins. "You're not the first Meniere's patient to tell me that," he said. "I don't see how it would hurt, although I can't officially recommend it." Don't ask, don't tell...

Only one person Constance confided in didn't keep her secret —the Breburn house manager, who informed a senior administrator who informed Vanderbilt's general counsel and several trustees. Constance was severely reprimanded and directed to receive treatment for her "behavior and drug use issues." She promised to never use marijuana again on university property.

"I could not promise in all honesty to never use marijuana again. I knew I would resort to using it again for its palliative effects in the future if I experienced severe,



SEMICIRCULAR CANALS detect changes in the direction of movement. These three hair-lined liquid-filled tubes sit just next to the utricle and saccule. They are named for their shape, which is semi-circular.

Each of the canals is located so it occupies three different planes, a handy arrangement, since we live in a three-dimensional world. When you turn your head, the fluid (endolymph) inside one or more of the canals presses against the hairs. Your brain receives a signal that your head is beginning to turn. As you stop turning, the endolymph presses against the hairs a different way. This signals the brain that you are stopping the turn.

Meniere's disease is believed to be caused by an excess of endolymphatic fluid in the inner ear. The fluid bursts from its normal channels in the ear and flows into other areas, causing damage to the surrounding membranes and vertigo.

—from Linda Allison's *Blood and Guts*

long-lasting nausea. Also, I refused to rule out the possibility that at some point in my life I might just do it again for fun."

Desperate to find relief from her illness, Constance underwent a surgical procedure that destroyed her hearing and vestibular function in the affected ear.

#### Scapegoat

In September 2006 the *Wall St. Journal* ran a front-page story about whether the Vanderbilt board of trustees was exercising adequate financial oversight over the chancellor's spending. The broader topic was —supposedly— the extent to which universities were heeding the Sarbanes-Oxley legislation on the governance of publicly held companies. Vanderbilt was chosen as the focus because Gordon Gee was the highest paid and one of the best known university chieftains in the land. Or maybe he was chosen because an enemy on the Vanderbilt board —or some Brown alumnus— had influence with the *WSJ*. The decks of headlines and subheads read:

#### Golden Touch

#### Vanderbilt Reins in Lavish Spending by Star Chancellor

#### As Schools Tighten Oversight A \$6 Million Renovation Draws Trustees' Scrutiny

#### Marijuana at the Mansion

There was a line drawing of E. Gordon Gee's and his big bow-tie on the front page. In the story itself Gordon came out looking just fine. Yes, he may have spent \$700,000 a year entertaining at the residence, but he raised more than a thousand times that amount. And if he spent \$6 million on renovating Braeburn, "Mr. Gee has dramatically boosted the 133-year-old school's academic standing and overseen fund raising of more than \$1 billion."

The trustees had been delighted with the revenue generated by the Gees' entertaining at the mansion. When they realized the *Journal* was going to ding them for failing to monitor expenditures, they diverted the reporters' attention to Constance's use of the infamous herb!

"The trustees' concern over their chancellor's expenditures," the *Journal* sequed wobblingly, "was aroused when they learned that Mrs. Gee was using marijuana at the mansion."

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Constance Gee's use of marijuana to treat Meniere's disease had absolutely nothing to do with the Vanderbilt trustees' failure to do their fiduciary duty. But it was turned into the lynchpin of the page-one piece by Joan Lublin and Daniel Golden, Pulitzer Prize winners who supposedly spent five-months researching it!

They wrote on behalf of their favored sources: "The marijuana incident troubled some trustees, who were bothered that Mr. Gee never told the full board about it, according to people familiar with the matter. To these trustees, the incident demonstrated that Mr. Gee needed to be more accountable to the board."

The article concluded, "In the fall of 2005, university employees discovered that Constance Gee, a tenured associate professor of public policy and education, kept marijuana at Braeburn and was using it there, according to people familiar with the matter. A few weeks later, several trustees

and a senior university official confronted Mr. Gee in his office, telling the chancellor he shared responsibility for allowing marijuana on university property, the person familiar with the situation recalls.

"Trembling, the chancellor replied: 'I've been worried to death over this,' according to this person. Mr. Gee said his wife smoked marijuana to relieve an inner-ear ailment, this person says. The Gees declined to comment on the incident."

The word "*sativa*" means *useful*. Cannabis sativa certainly proved useful to the Vanderbilt administrators who wanted to point the reporters towards something other than their own malfeasance.

Constance had been directed by Vanderbilt lawyers to say "no comment" to the *Journal* reporters. In her book she comments:

"An 'inner ear' ailment! With two Pulitzer Prize-winning journalists doing five months of sleuthing, the word 'Meniere's' had not been mentioned? Of course, a villainess with a genuinely serious disease might not seem so villainous. Smoking pot on the pretext of a mere 'ailment' would better serve sensationalist innuendo."

The day the *Journal* piece appeared Constance got a call on her cell phone from a reporter with the *Tennessean*, the Nashville daily. It came as a surprise because the number had hitherto been private. She replied "no comment," as ordered, but saw fit to add: "The inner-ear ailment' reported in the *Journal* is Meniere's disease. If you want to find out more about it, go online to Washington University's Meniere's website."

Next day the *Tennessean* published a piece with a description of Meniere's disease, quotes from an ear specialist at Washington University, and a deceitful assertion that Constance had confirmed her marijuana use to the reporter.

"Gordon marched into our bedroom brandishing the *Tennessean*, his face red and contorted: 'I told you not to talk to any reporters!'"

"I related exactly how the reporter had contacted me and what I had said. He refused to believe me, yelling about my indiscretion and stupidity. I asked him whom he was going to believe, his wife or a reporter. I pointed out the numerous times he had been misinterpreted by the press.

"That observation gave him a moment's pause, during which I implored, 'Gordon, you saw how terribly ill I was. Would you have rather seen me lie on the floor and vomit, or have had me smoke a little pot for some occasional relief?'"

"He looked me in the eye and said, 'I would rather have seen you sick.'"

Five months later he said he wanted a divorce. She had seen how skillfully he fired others, and now she was being fired herself. Vanderbilt's online student news service quoted a vapid administration press release and added, "The split comes five months after a report in the *Wall St. Journal* addressed Constance Gee's use of marijuana in the chancellor's university-owned residence, Braeburn."

That article was supposed to be about the trustees' failure to do their job, but in memory the subject had become marijuana in the mansion. How handy for Vandy.

#### A Cameo Role for O'Shaughnessy's

The *Tennessean* piece that identified Constance's ear ailment as Meniere's included information provided by otolaryngologist Timothy Hullar of Washington University School of Medicine ("one of two major centers of study on Meniere's"). Dr. Hullar said he had "never heard of anyone using medical marijuana to treat symptoms of Meniere's." He added, "There are a whole lot of other ways to treat it, lowering salt intake, taking water pills, many

other things. I can't imagine going to the extreme of marijuana."

*Hullar's comment showed the extent of the knowledge gap between cannabis consultants and mainstream physicians.*

Hullar's comment showed the extent of the knowledge gap between cannabis consultants and mainstream physicians. *O'Shaughnessy's Winter/Spring 2007* issue included an item about Constance Gee's medical/political ordeal, and quoted three California doctors who routinely approved the use of cannabis by Meniere's patients. Our item came to her attention and she quotes it in her memoir:

"Meniere's causes dizziness, dizziness causes nausea, cannabis relieves nausea," says David Bearman, MD. "I wouldn't be surprised if the symptoms caused Mrs. Gee to be a little depressed —and of course cannabis helps that, too."

Robert Sullivan, MD, corroborates: "I've issued many recommendations for Meniere's, as well as tinnitus [ringing in the ears]. It works well enough to make a significant improvement in patients' lives, i.e., symptoms not gone but much abated so they can function and carry on their daily activities, instead of sitting and suffering. It also aids sleep."

R. Stephen Ellis, MD, of San Francisco, has given some thought to how cannabis might help in the treatment of Meniere's. "Three possible mechanisms come to mind," he says. "Number one, the anti-anxiety effect of cannabis would be very useful to a Meniere's patient. These people are anxious as can be when they hit the ER. When they get an attack it's as if they are wired —that's why Ativan is one of the treatments, to bring them down. Two would be the anti-nausea effect. Duh! You're barfing and there's a drug that offers relief in 10 seconds. The third is slowing down the vertigo itself —the sensation of spinning caused by the inner ear problem. My patients say cannabis is as good as Antivert, which is the classic treatment, or Benadryl, which is used in certain situations. I recall reading that the auditory nerve does have CB1 receptors. I don't know about the cochlear structure itself."

In August 2010 Constance contacted Dr. Hullar and read him the quotes from Bearman, Sullivan and Ellis. "He was unmoved in his opinion," she relates in *Higher Education*. To date Hullar "had never had a patient tell him that he or she had used marijuana. He also did not know of any physicians who prescribed it for relief from Meniere's related nausea. 'It is not part of the standard repertoire,' he said."

It says something about Dr. Hullar that none of his Meniere's patients has revealed to him their use of marijuana. Not everyone is inhibited by prohibition from discussing marijuana use with their doctors. It depends on the two parties involved. Some individuals tend to be easily embarrassed, they fear disapproval; others are forthcoming. Some doctors signal that they are tolerant and open-minded, others signal rigid adherence to official dicta. Obviously, Hullar is among the latter.

Gordon Gee abruptly left Vanderbilt in 2007 (before the divorce was finalized) to return to the presidency of Ohio State. Constance resigned from the Vanderbilt faculty at the end of 2010. She moved to Massachusetts in October 2012, just in time to join the 63% of voters who approved the legalization of medical marijuana. If that sounds like the epilogue of a movie... Susan Sarandon ought to option *Higher Education: Marijuana at the Mansion*.

Till then it's available in soft cover or as an ebook from Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and marijuanaatthemansion.com.