

Becoming Dennis Peron

By Fred Gardner

Dennis Peron died in January, peacefully, at the VA Hospital in San Francisco. He was 71.

We had met earlier but really became friends in the summer of 1977 when Dennis was laid up in St. Vincent's Hospital (now very expensive condos across from Duboce Park), where he underwent surgery. His right thigh had been splintered by an SFPD narcotics officer's bullet during a raid on his Castro Street flat, known to some as "The Big Top." He was facing serious prison time.

I took down his story when the room wasn't full of friends or nurses or orderlies —all of whom Dennis chatted with and got to know a little.

In 1967 Dennis had received a draft notice from the Army and chose to join the Air Force, which meant a three- instead of a two-year hitch but guaranteed a non-combat specialty. He was trained as a radio operator and would be employed as a clerk.

Dennis had smoked marijuana back home in New York but didn't use it steadily until he was in training in the Air Force. He chose to spend his 30-day leave before shipping out to Vietnam in San Francisco (after a quick trip to see the family in New York).

Dennis recalled:

"I rented a room at the Texas Star Hotel, right next to the bus station. From the first time I walked down Haight Street I realized my life would never be the same. I was so happy. Before I left I got into a communal scene, living with about 20 people in this beautiful old house. A lot of people were trying to talk me into deserting —a lot of people— but I'm just not the kind of person who runs away from anything.

"I wasn't really anti-war until the Tet offensive began. I was stationed at Tan Sen Hut [Air Force Base] working as a clerk in the mail terminal. All the mail from the States would come through there and be shipped to all those bases. I made sergeant there. At night we'd go to this house in downtown Saigon that a bunch of us rented for \$100 a month— 10 GIs. We used to go there and smoke, that was our big thing. And we'd stay the night, no problem getting back on base.

"We were there playing Scrabble when all of a sudden, at midnight, all hell broke loose, shooting everywhere. Right down the street. Helicopter gunships all over the place, shooting from buildings. I shit in my pants. Couple of us had guns, none of us knew how to use them. They tried to teach me in basic training but I just couldn't do it. I always just closed my eyes. I had to qualify four times.

"There's no combat in the Air Force. The only combat we saw was that night, the night of the Tet offensive. [February 1, 1968] The only reason we got back to base was because they had helicopters flying overhead instructing Americans what to do. You had to run down the street. People were shooting at you. Bullets were flying by me, whole strings of them, a few feet away. Very scary! Ducking into alleys to get away from the shooting. There were convoys to the base. They were getting shot at. We all go to a convoy. Couple of busses were being towed by tanks and tractors. Gunships guarding us.

"People had been hiding them —actually hiding and cooperating with them."

"But even when we made it back, it wasn't over. There were snipers inside the compound. One on the water tower that was holding down the whole compound, picking off people here and there. The shooting lasted four or five days.

"It seemed like they had half a million North Vietnamese troops in Saigon. People had been hiding them —actually hiding and cooperating with them. And you can't say it was through fear or intimidation, that's too far-fetched.



DENNIS PERON (CENTER) IN BASIC TRAINING at Amarillo Air Force Base, April, 1966.

"So I got radicalized during the Tet offensive. I got real anti-war and that's when the bureaucracy started getting pissed at me. I was kinda refusing to cut my hair at the time, down-rapping the war all the time, trying to get my friends to down-rap it. Before Tet we were kind of complacent about it. We were stoned, not too involved. But when that happened I said, 'What the hell are we doing to these people?' I saw our own gunships killing innocent people. I got so shaken that from then on I was really one of the major agitators at Tan Sen Hut... In many ways I'd had that rightwing attitude that we were helping these people, that we were doing a good thing, never really realizing that it was a civil war."

It was during Tet that Dennis came out as a gay man. One of his duties had been to stack the body bags that would be flown back to the U.S. He started wearing a black armband and let his hair grow. He was transferred to a base in Thailand.

"Right on the border to Laos. The mission at the base was to bomb the Ho Chi Minh Trail. You could see the B52s bombing the trail, through the mountains, and you could feel it. You could feel it as much as seeing it. It would light up the sky. The Ho Chi Minh trail was about 30 miles away from us. I was a major's clerk."

Dennis was exposed to Agent Orange and always suspected it had damaged his lungs.

"I learned a lot of phrases and made a lot of friends. I had a beautiful time with the Thai people. I rented a house that had no door, no windows. I got around on a bicycle. I really went native.

"Sometimes I would have to act as interpreter. My company commander appreciated the community-relations job I was doing. 'Right on, Sgt. Peron.'

"Many of my GI friends went native, too. I was trying to radicalize as many people as I could. I said, 'Hey, come on, we can make these people our friends. These people can be our friends for life! I was trying to get as many GIs as possible away from that bar-prostitute scene that was really just set up for them.

"Before I left I went to a beautiful city in the northeast, Chang Mai. I rented a jeep and went up these mountain roads —another half inch and you're off the mountain. You come into these little villages with the Meo tribespeople all dressed up in their beautiful colorful garb, with their long pipes, just like out of a movie. I saw fields of marijuana that looked as big as all San Francisco, and so high up you were like in the clouds. Fields of Thai weed, the best weed in the world."

"The people welcomed me, they figured I was a big buyer or something. Who knows what they thought I was? And I did buy five or six pounds."

He started mailing marijuana to friends in the Haight in tape cassette containers. He said he spent more on the tapes than on the weed. He came back with several pounds hidden inside speakers in his Air Force duffel bag.

"I gave away four pounds —gave it to friends and friends of friends, Johnny Appleseed, free grass, free love, free everything. I was still an idealistic hippie. It was the start of 1970 but I thought everything was still like 1967. What a bummer to find out!"



"THE BIG TOP," THE PARLOR OF DENNIS PERON'S THIRD-FLOOR FLAT on Castro Street, had a comfortable ambiance, with house plants and lace curtains and teak bowls from Cost Plus full of joints to sample.

"When I came out of the service I decided to dedicate my life to world peace," he said all those years ago from his hospital bed. "Marijuana makes people peaceful. Alcohol makes people violent."

A middle-aged nurse had come into the room and Dennis pressed a joint on her: "Oh, come on," he bantered, "I know you want to try it. Just out of curiosity. Here, take it home. Wait till your husband is out somewhere. Open the windows and light up. No one'll ever know."

The nurse looked suspiciously at the joint and asked where it was from. "Colombia," Dennis said. "Where are you from?"

"Nicaragua." She patted Dennis on the arm and didn't take the joint. On the way out she turned back to him. "I hear it's very good from Thailand."

Dennis beamed. "You want Thai, huh? All right, come back this afternoon around five and I'll have some for you."

"One less faggot..."

The preliminary hearing in *People vs. Dennis Peron* was held in San Francisco Superior Court in early 1978. The officer who had shot Dennis, Paul Mackieveckas, blurted out during a recess that he wished he'd killed him so "there would be one less faggot in San Francisco." Witnesses told the judge, who threw out Mackieveckas's testimony. The prosecution, disheartened, offered Dennis jail time. During his seven months behind bars, Dennis planned a run for supervisor and organized a campaign for a ballot proposition he had written. The aptly named "Prop W" instructed San Francisco law enforcement not to press any marijuana-related charges.

"It's the miracle ounce! It's illegal to grow marijuana, it's illegal to possess a pound, it's illegal to sell or buy it. Where did all those people get their legal ounces? Every one of them must be a miracle!"

Dennis saw the contradictions in decriminalization. "It's the 'miracle ounce,'" he observed. "It's illegal to grow marijuana, it's illegal to possess a pound, it's illegal to sell or buy it. Where did all those people get their legal ounces? Every one of them must be a miracle!"

He was planning a legalization campaign at the state level when the assassination of Mayor George Moscone and Supervisor Harvey Milk took away his most powerful allies and turned the local political landscape into a wasteland as the 1970s came to an end.

And then came the epidemic. Dennis took his cue from the Healing Alternatives buyers club on Church Street, set up to provide vitamins at cost to AIDS patients and to obtain hoped-for cures—an Israeli egg-yolk extract known as AL-721 and "Compound Q," a Chinese cucumber extract that showed promise in vitro but was commercially unavailable in the US.

The first cannabis buyers club was launched in a flat on Sanchez Street in 1991. In '93 Dennis rented a 2,000 square foot room above a bar at Church and Market. The membership kept growing. In '95 the SFCBC moved into a five-story building on Market Street. And every one of those clubs felt like an extension of Dennis's living room.



The Institute of Medicine Visits the SFCBC

What Dennis Told the Experts

In January, 1997 —a month after the drug czar accused Tod Mikuriya, MD, of practicing “Cheech and Chong medicine— the *New England Journal of Medicine* ran an editorial calling federal policy “misguided,” “hypocritical,” “out of step with the public,” and “inhumane..”

On the day the *NEJM* editorial ran, Dr. Harold Varmus, director of the National Institutes of Health, announced that there would be a special conference to resolve “the public health dilemma” raised by the passage of Prop 215. “I don’t think anyone wants to settle issues like this by plebiscite,” said Varmus, calling instead for “a way to listen to experts on these topics.”

There followed a conference in February, organized by Alan Leshner of NIDA, at which medical specialists acknowledged the potential of cannabinoids, but concluded there was no credible evidence that marijuana was safe or effective in treating pain, neurological and movement disorders, etc., etc. The researchers called for “more and better studies.”

Suddenly the Drug Czar allocated \$1.5 million for a study by the Institute of Medicine (IOM) on the medical potential of cannabis and the cannabinoids. Tod Mikuriya commented: “Someone must have told McCaffrey, ‘No more Cheech & Chong jokes. We’re going to run a stall in the name of science.’”

In December 1997 The IOM investigators visited the west coast. They held a meeting at UC Irvine and got input from scientists and activists, then they made a side trip to the Bay Area to check out the cannabis buyers clubs. They arrived the day after an appellate court had ruled that Dennis Peron’s club was illegal. The headlines carried Attorney General Lungren’s vow to close down all the clubs.

The IOM team visited the Oakland Cannabis Buyers Co-operative, where Jeff Jones and staff described their operation in detail. Watson *et al* would arrive at the Market St. club while a memorial service was being held. They were told to get some lunch and come back.

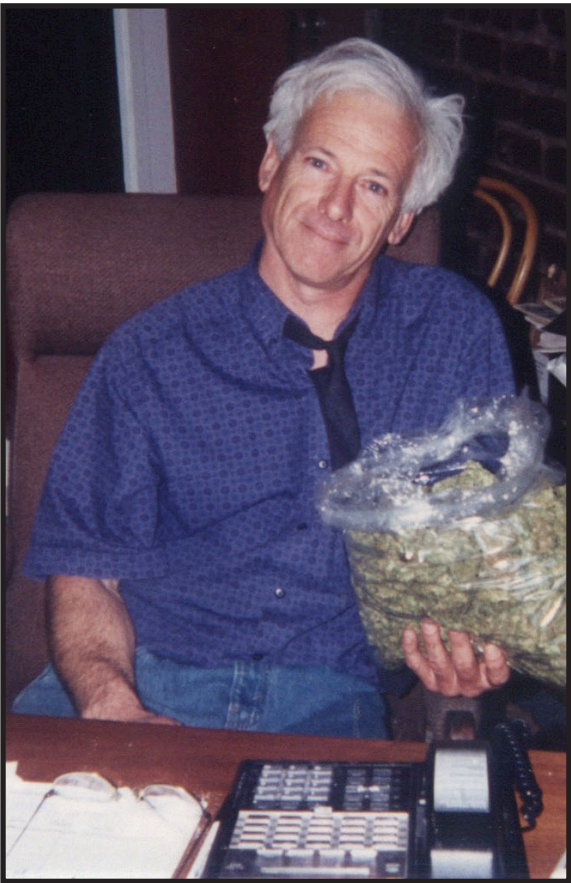
On the fourth floor Dennis Peron sat alone in the last row, head bowed, as friends, co-workers, and family members recalled Ken M., a person with AIDS who had worked at the club for four years. I wondered how many memorial services had Dennis attended?

“The friendliest guy,” Dennis was saying. “We always used to talk baseball... He was one of the best warriors for medicinal marijuana... When we marched on the DEA, it was Ken who made up those wonderful chants: ‘Racist, sexist, anti-gay —we don’t need the DEA!’”

When he finally spoke with the Institute of Medicine team in his office, Dennis said he had glanced at their questionnaire, but it was now buried under a pile of paper on his desk. Then, off the top, he gave them a breakdown of the club members’ medical conditions with figures remarkably close to what the Oakland club’s research committee had reported

Somebody came into the office with Ken’s ashes under his arm, said goodbye, and exited. Dennis turned back to the IOM team with a generalization: “People’s responses to marijuana are like an inverted U. On one end of the U there are people who should never do marijuana. They take a puff of it, they get red, they cough, they get paranoid, they feel like death is imminent. And on the other end of that U is somebody in a wheelchair or they’re in constant pain, they should never be without it. In between is everybody else.”

He went on: “This is a club of last resort for some people. How I run it is, I try to think of it as a country club for poor people who have never really had much in their life. And now that they are physically challenged, they even have less. Most of them are living on SSI in tiny one-room hotels



downtown where everything’s crazy and the bathroom’s down the hall and there’s screaming people down the hall. When they come here it’s like a sanctuary for them. There’s comfortable couches, there’s places to sit at tables and talk.

The biggest part of healing is not being alone.

“You’ll see combinations you never see outside except on a bus: a black person with a white person with a brown person with a gay person, a rich person and a poor person —well, you wouldn’t see that on the bus— all at the same table, all sharing a part of their life. I like to think of this as a giant group therapy! And no matter what you got, this is therapy for it. And marijuana is part of it, but the biggest part of healing is not being alone. They always find that people who are alone die faster.”

Dennis told the doctors, frankly but diplomatically, that he was skeptical about their mission. “You know, the medical potential of marijuana has been studied to death. The Schafer commission came back —you remember that one, 1972? Nixon appoints this commission. ‘I want you to study it.’ The commission comes back and says ‘Decriminalise.’ ‘We can’t do that!’ So he totally disregarded the commission’s voice.... The National Academy of Sciences, 1981-82 report, originally commissioned by Jimmy Carter...”

The IOM doctors nodded as if they were very familiar with it. Dennis went on: “It was vague, it was ambiguous, but there was enough room to reschedule marijuana. Only by then Reagan was president and he threw the report in the garbage. Wouldn’t even publish it for a while. Then there was the DEA study that they chose to ignore, Judge Francis Young, 1988. And now there’ll be another study.”

After a beat Dr. John Benson, a bow-tie wearing MD —as if sent by central casting— smiled and said, “Help us,” in an earnest tone that implied, “This time will be different.” Dennis said he would show them around the club.

The Ballad of Dennis Peron

I’m gonna tell you the story of Dennis Peron
Our neighborhood dealer, well liked and well known
with something miraculous always on sale
and now he’s facing more time in jail

How many ways and how many times
must we be the victims of victimless crimes?

COMING OUT of the service, finally free
An idealist wondering what should I be?
Living with friends in a house in the Haight
he decided a new kind of space to create

It was a place you could come to, hang out and try
Gold in the old days, Colombian, Thai
and listen to music and choose what you want
without giving strangers no money up front

They didn’t sell hard drugs no downers no speed
only some magic mushrooms and weed
And hippies and housewives and hardhats came
and Dennis knew everyone by their first name

How many ways, how many times
must we be the victims of victimless crimes?

Rip-offs arrived with guns and knives
Dennis and Cloud fought to survive
‘Cause they had a purpose and a whole lot of nerve
and a whole lot —a whole lot— of “the people” to serve

They busted him all the time way back then
when just holdin a joint was a felony and a sin
Before that miracle ounce came in
Well would you believe he’s been busted again!
(That’s right)

Castro off Liberty one night in July
with Eyewitness News just crusing by (Sure!)
Ten cops got nothin’ better to do
Than bust Dennis Peron and his pot-smokin’ crew

How many ways? How many times?
Must we be the victims of victimless crimes?

Listen up people wherever you’re at
A downtown office, a Haight Street flat
That miracle ounce y’all legally own
Probly come from a pound care of Dennis Peron

Better get into his cause ‘cause it’s yours
We gotta get rid of these dangerous laws
If Dennis can’t deal with those God-awful pounds
How can y’all score your miracle ounce?

And how many ways and how many times
And how many victims of victimless crimes
We gonna let them get away with?

New ending 1996

Now many a year has passed since that one
and Dennis seen many a friend come and gone
So All For Love in the heart of the state
He decided a new kind of space to create

A place you can come to and hang out and buy
Cannabis if you got a good reason why
Like it settles your tummy, clears up your sight
helps you relax and have bon appetite

Just an herb that groweth in God’s green earth
Where Eli Lilly can’t patent its worth
Sign that petition, demand a truce
in the war on drugs for medical use

It could happen to you we’re all flesh and bone
But then you may find that you ain’t all alone

‘Cause now there’s a club, organically grown
With care given thanks to Dennis Peron
Thanks to Dennis Peron

—Fred Gardner



TOD MIKURIYA, MD wrote an admissions protocol for the San Francisco Cannabis Buyers Club in January 1994, and began interviewing members for a paper, “*Cannabis Medicinal Uses at a Buyers Club*.” The historically significant manuscript is part of the Mikuriya collection at the National Library of Medicine, and can be found online at BeyondTHC.com Thanks to John Rees of the NLM for providing a copy.



Mikuriya used a structured questionnaire to document the range of symptoms reportedly alleviated by cannabis— insomnia, depression, anxiety, panic attacks, arthritis and other pain, alcoholism... The study would provide support for the sentence in Proposition 215 authorizing physicians to approve marijuana use in treating any condition for which it provides relief. After Prop 215 passed, Mikuriya’s patient base grew



and so did the list of conditions for which patients reported benefit. In the Summer 2005 issue of *O’Shaughnessy’s* Mikuriya listed 280 conditions by ICD-9 code. (See Dr. Herger rather’s list by ICD-10 code on page 5 of this issue.) Rick Gerharter of the Bay Area Reporter photographed Mikuriya conducting interviews in January 1994—with help from SF-CBC staffer Mary Rathbun (“Brownie Mary”).