EXCERPTS FROM IT’S NORML TO SMOKE POT BY KEITH STROUP

As I was preparing to graduate from law school, I became aware of a study group that Congress had created called the National Commission on Product Safety. It was almost entirely due to the trailblazing work of Ralph Nader, a Princeton Law graduate working as a consumer advocate, initially focusing on auto safety, and then advocating for safer consumer products in general.

Senator Warren Magnuson (D-WA) became a leading advocate for consumer safety in Congress, and at Nader’s prodding, led the effort to establish the two-year National Commission on Product Safety, to examine household products and make recommendations for what steps Congress might take to improve consumer safety. Important for my purpose was the opening paragraph of the legislation establishing the commission, declaring it was “important to the health, safety and welfare of the nation.” That language would prove useful in my draft-dodging strategy.
I was serious about avoiding the draft. I had contacted volunteer lawyers from the National Lawyers Guild, a fine organization that had stepped up to provide free legal advice to the large numbers of young men seeking to stay out of Vietnam.

One option they offered was to refer me to a sympathetic psychiatrist in Baltimore who would say I was gay. Being gay meant being ineligible for the military. I gave that option some serious thought, and might have pursued it, but my wife was threatened by the idea.

The second option they offered was to put me in touch with people who could help me relocate to Canada. There were hundreds, perhaps thousands, of young men who had fled to Canada by then, and a supportive community in Canada was helping them get reestablished. The main downside to this option was that there was no assurance the US government would ever permit draft dodgers to come home. To never again be able to enter the United States seemed too extreme for my tastes. There had to be a better option out there.

With the help of the volunteer lawyers, I found it. I applied for what was called a critical skills deferment. During the
Not the news I had been hoping for.

We were bused back home and told that we would receive our orders to report for active duty within two weeks. Needless to say, I was more than a little relieved when my critical skills deferment arrived in time to save my sorry ass.

I had applied to my draft board back in southern Illinois for the deferment. Early on in the Vietnam War, draft boards wanted everyone to serve, and disliked making exceptions. But folks in rural parts of the country began to notice that a large percentage of young draftees were coming home either in pine boxes or terribly wounded, while more of the kids in urban areas had money to go to college or otherwise avoid the war. They began to resent that reality, and to try to help their boys find a lawful way out. I believe that when they saw my application, they wanted to protect me, and so they granted the deferment.

It definitely changed my life, and I was an incredibly lucky man. The Vietnam War was the defining issue of my generation. Tens of thousands of young men just like me were killed or wounded, and the war had a lasting impact on all who served, as well as those who did not.

The two years working at the commission were wonderful years. I was working as a lawyer at a prestigious commission on K Street in downtown Washington instead of fighting in Vietnam. And I was learning from the master, Ralph Nader. Nader was a self-appointed advocate; Nader himself was totally straight, the name that painted them as brave crusaders willing to take on major corporations, had turned him into a folk hero.

We went to Nader’s offices weekly to review mail he received from average Americans complaining about unsafe products. Often they had never heard of the National Commission on Product Safety, but they had heard of Nader and were writing to tell him about their experiences. We returned to the commission and planned public hearings largely based on problems identified from Nader’s mail, often using the authors of the letters to testify. Our mission was largely informed by Ralph Nader’s work and the public’s response to it.

Nader was the individual who first piqued my interest in starting a marijuana legalization lobby. He was an inspiring consumer advocate. Working around Nader at the product safety commission made me consider using my legal training to work for the interests of American consumers, instead of just trying to get rich. My generation included, for the first time, a significant number of middle-class young adults who had been turned on to marijuana, and I was inspired to use the consumer advocate model Nader had used so successfully for product safety to challenge marijuana prohibition.

Nader had brought in groups of graduate students, many of them lawyers, who worked to help expand his effectiveness. Nader remained the public face, but he inspired these idealistic young reformers to do much of the hard work and to devote a few years of their lives to the cause. They were often called “Nader’s Raiders” in the press, a name that painted them as brave crusaders willing to take on the establishment.

Because of my frequent visits to Nader’s offices, I soon became friends with several of the Raiders. While Nader himself was totally straight, the Raiders were not. We quickly became comfortable hanging out socially, part of a small circle of friends that often got together on weekends to smoke mari-
Most of us were familiar with using marijuana to enhance our enjoyment of good food and good music, and we spent hours at a time with the stereo turned up, listening over and over again to the same Joe Cocker or Leon Russell or Elton John or Eagles or The Band or Rolling Stones album, convinced that we were hearing something more profound than we had ever experienced. Smoking pot was like turning up the senses about fifty percent and allowing yourself to enjoy the intensity. We looked forward to sharing our favorite bands with the group each weekend and getting stoned into the wee hours of the night. Most of our friends at the time lived downtown and could walk to the N Street house, and perhaps more importantly, could walk home in an impaired condition at any hour of the night, which they frequently did.

It was my first experience of getting as stoned as I could possibly get for hours in a group setting. It created a bond among us. We were fellowstoners daring to travel to new places in our minds, protected in an environment where we didn’t need to worry about the outside, where we could relax and experience the high without feeling self-conscious or worrying about the straight world. We felt as if we were pushing the levels of our consciousness, and experiencing new realities.

The National Commission on Product Safety was a two-year commission, and unless Congress was inclined to extend its life, its end was set in stone. As we began to edge nearer to that deadline, my need to decide what I would do next became paramount. I needed to provide for our family, which now included my daughter, Lindsey, born on January 15th, 1969.

By the end of the commission, I was turning twenty-nine and was no longer eligible for the draft, eliminating the biggest fear shared by all men of my generation. I could now think about my future without that overriding concern.

One of my colleagues at the commission was Larry Schott. Larry had married the daughter of Indiana Senator Vance Hartke, and became the chief investigator at the commission—an appointment that may have had something to do with his father-in-law. Larry and I became fast friends, and he introduced me to a hippie friend of his, Joe Sharpe. Joe supported his lifestyle by buying marijuana on the west coast, driving it back across the country and selling it to people like Larry and me.

Joe frequently joined us on the weekend, and sometimes for an evening break during the week. He always brought some new strain of pot he had discovered, and he would regale us with tales of his marijuana smuggling. Over the two years of the commission, and for a couple of years afterwards, Joe remained a friend, and was our principal supplier of marijuana.

He was periodically arrested for traffic offenses, and then busted for whatever pot he inevitably had in his van (his long hair and the peace symbol bumper stickers on his car guaranteed enhanced scrutiny by the police). I represented him on a minor possession offense when I was barely out of law school; the case was dropped when the prosecutor, confronted with a clearly illegal search, agreed to dismiss the charges.

At other times Joe was stopped during his cross-country trips to bring marijuana back to the east coast, but he remained a free man, because of good lawyering or in some instances, good fortune. He remained free to live his pot dealing, hippie life style for many years, although eventually he went more underground to avoid being served a warrant for failing to appear at one hearing or another, and he finally drifted off my radar altogether.

I heard from one of his friends sometime in the last few years that Joe had died a natural death. I believe he was living in southern California at the end of his life. I’m sure he was doing what he had always done—helping the underground marijuana market get product to the tens of millions of consumers who want it.

Chapter 3: Starting NORML

I spent a good part of the year planning to start a marijuana-related project when the commission ended, but I was still uncertain what it should be. Initially, I thought like a lawyer. Since so many Americans were being busted on marijuana charges, I thought perhaps I could come up with insurance that people could buy to cover their legal expenses.

It remains a fascinating idea even today, but the wide range of offenses with which a marijuana offender might be charged, from simple possession to major trafficking, and the wide range of sentences available under the various fifty state laws, made it nearly impossible to know what to charge for such a service. It seemed like a worthy goal, but not a good business model. It was far too risky financially, and there was the possibility of running up against state bar association rules and regulations. At the time, lawyers couldn’t legally advertise in most states.

So I left behind the notion of bust insurance and began to imagine an organization that was more Nader-like: representing marijuana smokers instead of buyers of unsafe consumer products, but with the same general goals. I wanted to figure out what marijuana smokers want and need, and then try to impact public policy toward that end. To speak for marijuana smokers, even if they hadn’t asked me to assume that responsibility.

A marijuana smokers’ union wasn’t a new idea, although we would end up giving it a more middle-class look, with coats and ties instead of long hair and blue jeans. In the 1950s, LeMar (for Legalize Marijuana) was founded in New York, largely the work of beat poet Allen Ginsberg. LeMar made some noise and formed a few
satellite chapters around the state, but hadn’t made any impact outside the beatnik generation.

The other major influence during the months leading up to NORML’s founding was, without question, former US Attorney General Ramsey Clark. At that point I had been politically radicalized by the war in Vietnam and the anti-war movement that flourished. And one of the most influential and outspoken advocates for getting our troops out of Vietnam and ending the war was Ramsey Clark.

Clark, a highly principled man whose father was US Supreme Court Justice Tom Clark, had retired as US Attorney General and almost immediately became a leading spokesperson for ending the war and bringing our troops home. Because of his anti-war work, especially the trip he made to Hanoi with Jane Fonda, Clark had also become despised by those in support of the war. Clark continues that tradition today by representing the interests of those who otherwise might not be represented, such as the late Saddam Hussein.

As an experienced draft dodger, I idolized Ramsey Clark. I had read Clark’s book, Crime In America, in which he called for the legalization of marijuana. That seemed like a message from God. He opposed the war and supported legalized marijuana: how good could it get? We needed this man. He was a compassionate criminal justice expert who valued personal freedom and opposed wasting law enforcement resources on victimless crimes.

It seemed vital to have his approval and support to move forward with my marijuana legalization project. He was the American I most admired at that time, and I wanted his blessing. I knew I was about to make a decision that could impact my whole life, and I wanted someone I respected, someone wiser than me, to tell me it was the right thing to do.

I needed to find a way to discuss my idea for NORML with Clark, and I didn’t know how to make that happen. I had never met him, and we didn’t have any mutual acquaintances that might arrange a meeting.

At that time Clark was establishing himself at a prominent Washington law firm, while he sought to use his prominence to advance a number of liberal causes—most importantly, the civil rights movement. From his experience as attorney general, he was well aware that blacks were not treated fairly or equally in the criminal justice system, and he was dedicated to helping right that obvious, massive wrong.

I called Clark’s office and asked for an appointment with him to discuss my project. The secretary who handled his schedule gently blew me off, but after a few more calls, and some patience, she decided that Clark just might be interested, so she raised it with him, and he agreed to meet with me.

I was nervous when I went to see him, and many of the details of the meeting are now lost to my hazy memory, but on the key point I remain very clear. I explained to Clark what I wanted to do with NORML, and admitted that it frightened me a bit, because I was married with a young daughter, and if the project didn’t work out, my career might be permanently scarred. Clark said without hesitation that it was an important project and I should undertake it, and that I should move forward with it while I was young, and could still take risks. “It will only get more difficult as you get older and have more responsibilities,” he said, “so follow your heart now and do it.”

Clark also gave me some helpful public relations advice. I had, after many long nights smoking weed with my friend and colleague Larry Schott, come up with the acronym NORML, which stood for the National Organization for the Repeal of Marijuana Laws. I liked the directness of the name—it sent a clear message about the goals of the organization—and I appreciated the double entendre. We wanted to make the point that it was normal to smoke marijuana.

So, I was somewhat disturbed when Clark advised me to change the name of NORML to the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws. He felt that name would sound less radical to elected officials whose support we would be seeking. I had resisted changes to the name when others had made similar suggestions, but Clark was convincing, and I immediately agreed to the change. I wanted to demonstrate to him that I was trying to be reasonable and professional in my approach, and that I was willing to accept his advice. I wanted his support for the project, and changing the name seemed insignificant as long as I could tell others that Ramsey Clark was working with me.

I left his office after that first meeting with my feet barely touching the ground. I felt so reinforced by his approval and encouragement. I had met my political hero, and he said I wasn’t crazy after all. I should move forward with my plans to launch NORML.

Clark did disappoint me a bit at that initial meeting by saying he couldn’t join our advisory board at the time, or otherwise publicly identify with the issue, because he did not want to jeopardize the civil rights work he was involved in. He said he would have more freedom to join NORML publicly in a couple of years, which sounded like a lifetime away at the time, but I was so fortified by his approval and encouragement that I never looked back; I was moving forward full-time with NORML, whatever the risks.

A couple of years later Clark did join the NORML Advisory Board; he served for a decade and was a featured speaker at several NORML conferences. Ramsey Clark brought enormous credibility to NORML during our early years.

I began meeting with a ramp board of directors for the NORML project in the fall of 1970 and continuing through the early months of 1971, before filing our incorporation papers on March 2, 1971. We had a myriad
of questions that needed answering, such as what type of governing board to establish, and how to define our goals.

The specific goals of the organization, which can be found in the original document filed with the District of Columbia in 1971, were quite modest:

Compile and maintain a current listing of all federal and state marijuana laws;

Publish pertinent information concerning developments in the law relating to the existence, enforcement and judicial interpretation of marijuana laws;

Compile and report the results of all pertinent research concerning the medical, scientific and sociological effects of marijuana;

Educate the public and legislators of the need to reform the penalties and legal consequences presently surrounding the possession, use and sale of marijuana;

And, develop model legislation appropriate for the proper control of marijuana.

NORML’s initial board of directors consisted of Larry Schott; my wife Kelly; Larry Dubois, a writer friend; Frank Simon, a smoking buddy who had experience working with other not-for-profit groups; and, of course, me.

I remained in touch with Ramsey Clark and met with him several more times as I tried to figure out how best to get the organization off the ground and where to get funding. In early 1971, Clark wrote a personal note to Hugh Hefner, urging his support for NORML. Hefner had become a friend of Clark’s because of his anti-war work, and Clark was instrumental in winning Hefner’s support, without which we would never have been approved for a Playboy Foundation grant, which was crucial in the first decade of the organization’s history. 😊

**BIO:** Paul Armentano is the Deputy Director of NORML, the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws, and the NORML Foundation. NORML is the oldest and most recognized lobbying and educational organization dedicated to marijuana policy. He has been employed by the organization in various positions for 15 years.

**MR. ARMENTANO** is recognized as an expert on the subject of marijuana policy. He has spoken at numerous national conferences and legal seminars; testified before state legislatures and federal agencies, and assisted dozens of criminal defense attorneys in cases pertaining to the use of medicinal cannabis, drug testing, and drugged driving. He also serves of the faculty of Oaksterdam University in Oakland, where he lectures on the science surrounding the safety and efficacy of medical cannabis. He is the author of the book *Emerging Clinical Applications for Cannabis* (NORML Foundation, 2007, updated 2011 and 2012), which reviews some 200 clinical and preclinical studies assessing the therapeutic properties of marijuana and its organic compounds.

Mr. Armentano is a frequent guest on national radio and television, having appeared on FoxNews, MSNBC, and CBS News. His writing and research regarding marijuana and marijuana policy have appeared in approximately 1,000 publications, including CNN.com, New York Times, Washington Post, and The Christian Science Monitor, as well as in some two-dozen academic textbooks and anthologies. Mr. Armentano is a 2008 recipient of the ‘Project Censored Real News Award for Outstanding Investigative Journalism.’ In 2009, he co-authored the book *Marijuana is Safer: So Why Are We Driving People to Drink?* (2009, Chelsea Green), which has appeared on Amazon.com’s best-sellers list and has been licensed and translated internationally.
For such a young guy, you’ve been at this for a while. Why is cannabis reform so important to you? Was there a defining moment?
I have long believed that it is an inappropriate exercise of state power to allow lawmakers to draw an arbitrary line that says it’s legally acceptable to ingest certain substances in private, but not others — particularly one that is objectively safer than alcohol and possesses therapeutic efficacy. By accepting such a gross government intrusion into our private behavior, we have allowed the government unprecedented power to dictate and regulate virtually every and all aspects of our daily lives. Legalizing cannabis curtails this steadily growing encroachment into our private lives and behaviors and allows adults a greater degree of autonomy over our most precious asset — our minds.

How long have you been with NORML?
About 16 years.

What role do you occupy at NORML?
My titles and roles have matured throughout the years. Initially, I primarily managed NORML’s communication and publications. Later, I became more involved in policy and strategy. Today, I serve as the organization’s Deputy Director — a role that encompasses most every aspect of marijuana law reform advocacy and outreach. I’m also co-author of the book Marihuana Is Safer: So Why Are We Driving People to Drink? (2009, Chelsea Green), a member of the faculty at Oaksterdam University, and I am frequently retained as an expert for the defense in various criminal matters specific to cannabis.

Why did you choose NORML as your battleground?
The political and public impetus for America’s so-called ‘drug war’ begins and ends with cannabis prohibition. If cannabis is no longer classified as an illegal commodity, and if its consumers are no longer classified as criminals, then there is no longer a justification for a federal — and international — drug war. There simply aren’t enough consumers of other illicit substances to justify the size and scope of the existing policy. Addressing the criminalization of cannabis addresses the most egregious and arbitrary aspect of drug prohibition. Reforming cannabis prohibition removes a primary justification for the government’s ongoing intrusion into our private lives. Reforming cannabis prohibition removes a primary justification for the government’s erosion of our civil liberties. And reforming cannabis prohibition drives a stake through the heart of the broader drug war by forever altering the mentality that it is an acceptable use of government power and force to target, arrest, prosecute, and incarcerate someone for the ingestion of certain substances. It isn’t — end of story.

What do you think has been and is NORML’s most important role?
Consistency. We’ve been around the longest. We possess institutional memory. We know the players; the players know us. Our supporters, the media who we speak to daily, even our opponents acknowledge that we are sincere in our beliefs. And we are credible. NORML prides itself as the source for trusted and reliable information about cannabis, its effects, and the public policies governing it. Trust can’t be built overnight; it’s earned over years. I would like to think that NORML has earned the trust of the reform community and the respect of our political opposition.

Your favorite part of the job?
Raising awareness and changing minds — especially the minds of those in a position to bring about changes in law and in the daily lives of those around them.

Least favorite part of the job?
Bearing witness to the real word, often tragic ramifications the criminalization of cannabis has on everyday people. And trying not to become jaded when you are exposed to such events on an almost daily basis. And trying to still believe in a political system that allows such adverse human consequences to continue unabated without so much as even acknowledging that they are happening. Cannabis prohibition isn’t organic. It continues because a majority of those in political power allow it to continue and encourage it to continue. It is difficult, if not impossible, to either respect or believe in a system — and the elected officials who occupy it — that fosters such a status quo and allows it to go on unchallenged.

Last week’s elections. Describe how you felt when you saw the results of the vote.
Relieved. Vindicated. That there had been a seismic change in the political landscape and that this genie isn’t going to go back into the bottle.

Like alcohol prohibition before it, the criminalization of cannabis is a failed federal policy that delegates the burden of enforcement to the state and local police. How did America’s ‘Nobel Experiment’ with alcohol prohibition come to an end? Simple. When a sufficient number of states enacted legislation repealing the state’s alcohol prohibition laws. With state police and prosecutors no longer complying with the government’s wishes to enforce an unpopular law, federal politicians eventually had no choice but to abandon the policy altogether. On Election Night I said to myself, “History is repeating itself. This is the beginning of the end of cannabis prohibition.”

We’ve seen how these initiatives, for various reasons, divide the reform movement. What now, how do we get everyone on the same page?
We’ve reached a consensus regarding the failure of cannabis prohibition. More Americans believe in the concept of legalizing cannabis rather than criminalizing it. But that’s only the first step in a much longer battle over public opinion. The hard part will be gaining consensus regarding what legalization entails. Legalizing cannabis means very different things to different people. As advocates, we have to acknowledge these differences and we must seek and be willing to accept compromise in order to achieve some level of consensus. We must also acknowledge that there is arguably not a ‘one size fits all’ solution to this equation — nor
Some activists say that the current initiatives didn’t go far enough. How do you respond to that?

Both measures provide adult cannabis consumers with unprecedented legal protections. Until now, no state law has defined cannabis as a legal commodity. Some state laws do provide for a legal exception that allows for certain qualified patients to possess specific amounts of cannabis as needed. But, until now, no state in modern history has classified cannabis itself as a legal product that may be lawfully possessed and consumed by adults.

Why is this distinction important? Consider this: In California, the state that is considered by many to possess the most liberal medical marijuana laws, police (and state law) define cannabis, even when present in only minor amounts, as contraband. This means that the presumption of law enforcement and prosecutors is that a person possesses or cultivates cannabis unlawfully. The burden, therefore, is on the would-be defendant to establish that they are legally exempt under the law as a qu alified patient. In some cases, this might mean showing proper paperwork to a police officer. (The arresting officer may or may not choose to accept this paperwork as legitimate.) In other instances, it may entail having to prove one’s case in a court of law. Either way, the mindset of the state is clear: cannabis is illegal — unless it can be established otherwise.

Not so under Amendment 64 and I-502. Rather than presuming cannabis to be illicit, and that those who possess it are engaged in illegal activity, passage of these measures mandate law enforcement and prosecutors to presume that cannabis is in fact legal, and that those who possess it in personal-use quantities are engaged in legal activity, unless the state can show that there are extenuating circumstances proving otherwise. This is more than a step in the right direction. This is a seismic change in the way society views and defines cannabis and the way the state and law enforcement legally interact with cannabis consumers.

What does Mr. Paul Armentano do once cannabis is completely legal throughout the nation? Other causes or will legalization bring other challenges?

Even in a climate of legalization there will still be battles to be fought — battles over proper regulations, battles over ceasing discrimination against cannabis consumers, and battles over maintaining the gains — both legal and political — for which we have fought so hard for. I have little doubt that in the years to come, even if there is a ‘truce’ declared in the literal war on cannabis consumers, that there will still be a cultural war being waged against cannabis consumers. So there will always be challenges go face and there will always be advocates to face them. And hopefully I can help pave the way for them.

BIO: Sabrina Fendrick is the founder and coordinator of the NORML Women’s Alliance (established in 2010 as a project of the NORML Foundation). She came to NORML in 2008 and currently works out of NORML’s DC headquarters organizing female focused campaigns and fundraisers, as well as managing a large database of female volunteers. Fendrick has been quoted in several national and international news publications including the Associated Press and the London Times. She has been a guest on several radio programs, been interviewed by local TV news affiliates, and spoken at various drug reform conferences on the issue of women and marijuana.

Fendrick regularly speaks with student groups and has testified in front of both the Maryland and Virginia state legislature in support of marijuana reform bills. She also established NORML’s social networking presence, including their Facebook page, which currently boasts over 425,000 supporters. In 2007 she received a Bachelor of Arts degree from Christopher Newport University with a focus on political science and communications.

How did you come to be a NORML Woman?
I was caught with marijuana on campus my junior year and was forced to go to the school’s judicial affairs department and do community service. I just couldn’t understand why possession of marijuana carried such a harsh penalty. I started to do some research on my computer. The more I learned about why marijuana was illegal in the first place, the more frustrated and fascinated I became.

I graduated from college in 2007 with a BA in communications and political science. I specifically chose to spend the majority of my senior year producing a preliminary thesis analyzing the impact of the media campaigns that preceded the first federal policy prohibiting certain access to marijuana (the 1937 tax act), and the evolution of the government’s propaganda into the twenty-first century.

In the early spring of 2008, I moved back home to Arlington, VA to look for a job. I always wanted to work for a marijuana law reform organization, and even got some part-time work at the Marijuana Policy Project. One day, while still on the job hunt and scrolling through Craigslist, I fortuitously came across a job listing for the National NORML office in DC, a few miles away from my house. I applied for the two positions that were listed, but wound-up being hired into a newly made position, Executive Assistant to Allen St. Pierre. At that time, Bush was still president and John Walters, the Drug Czar. At that time, progress was slow and victories far between.

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It’s amazing to see how far the movement has come. Needless to say, my time at NORML has been endlessly fascinating.

You are a founder of the NWA. What were your motivations and goals at the time and have they been realized?

There were many things driving me to start the NORML Women’s Alliance. The most important reason was because there needed to be a place for women to highlight their unique concerns related to marijuana prohibition, such as pregnancy, custody and health. Also, despite the fact that women make up more than 50% of the US population, women make up a disproportionately small percentage of marijuana law reform activists. And as a result, women have been underutilized in the conception and execution phase of crafting the pro-reform argument. The final coo against prohibition will come when there is a majority of support for legalization among women, especially mothers.

My goal was to provide a forum and a platform to engage women who don’t agree with marijuana prohibition, but also may not smoke or associate with the hippy, counter-culture that has stereotypically been associated with this form of activism. These women are soccer moms, young professionals, artists, activists and everything in between. It was also my goal to create a welcoming, nurturing community for women that are involved, or thinking about getting involved with this issue. As well as to help mentor new activists ready to speak out.

I wouldn’t say my goals have definitively been realized, as marijuana is not yet legal nationwide. I will say, however, that I am so proud and inspired by how far we have come in reaching those goals. I have an international group of community organizers who have created a local platform to push this issue and force the conversation. Our Sister-to-Sister program with Students for Sensible Drug Policy has matched over 500 women in the NWA network.

Why is it important to have a distinct chapter for women within NORML? Has this separation ever been hindering or specifically beneficial?

Thank you for asking this question. Just to clarify, the NORML Women’s Alliance is not a chapter-based program like regular NORML chapters. It’s a project of the National NORML Foundation, a 501(c)3 tax-deductible nonprofit. We encourage women to informally organize and network around this issue. I also don’t like to use the term “separation.” It is not a separation, it is a deliberate and specific form of outreach to a crucial, yet under-represented demographic. We are building support, not separating it.

It is important to have the women’s alliance be distinct and independent because that is what makes the whole thing work.

Running this targeted outreach program, especially one geared towards empowering women, has been a challenging and valuable experience. It was difficult to come to terms with the fact that there are, and have been some otherwise like-minded people, who just don’t understand the need or feel resentful. I was definitely surprised because lots of social and political advocacy organizations, including the National Rifle Association and the American Civil Liberties Union have women-focused programs. This is not really a new concept, although I suppose it was to the marijuana law reform movement. On the other hand, developing this program has been very advantageous in opening new doors and attracting new people to the movement. It has also renewed enthusiasm and brought like-minded women together who otherwise wouldn’t associate with the marijuana law reform movement.

How has the mainstream responded to the NWA, do you find they treat you any differently than the men?

The mainstream seems to be fascinated by the NWA and the whole concept of women and our relationship with marijuana. Historically, men have made up the majority of marijuana activists, and are considered to be more frequent users. It is more of a shock factor in that women who use cannabis or support legalization defy a deeply rooted stereotype.

What do you say to those that believe NORML to be a bloated and ineffective group?

The organization has been fighting for legalization and organizing chapters for more than forty years. Like any organization that has been around for four decades, there have been high points and low points. People have not always agreed with the direction of the organization. NORML has seen thousands of interns and volunteers come through, and (likely) over a hundred employees have devoted their time to this cause. NORML has served as a breeding ground for all kinds of marijuana and drug reform activism.

The main thing is, however, that NORML was not only the first successful American organization to advocate for legalization, it has been able to sustain a strong, active local and state grassroots chapter network. It is also the largest clearinghouse for information related to marijuana policy, science and news. NORML has the greatest brand recognition, and largest audience base, over a million people, of any other drug reform organization in the world. That enables us to reach more people than any other group. The National office and chapters have been directly involved with a majority of marijuana law reform victories. Over time, through technology and tenacity, NORML has shown its ability to adapt and evolve with the social and political climate of the day. I think most people who feel that way are simply uninformed about what NORML has done, and unaware of the kind of work we do.

What’s next for Sabrina?

That’s a heavy question. There’s a bunch of things I would like to do once marijuana prohibition is all said and done, but for now I simply want to work on making the NWA the best it can be.
BIO: Erik Altieri studied philosophy and religious studies at American University. He began interning at the National NORML office in 2008. In 2009, he became communications director, merging technology to NORML’s traditional grassroots activism. He is a frequent contributor to the NORML blog covering the issues of state legislative affairs, polling and politics and has been quoted extensively on marijuana policy in the media. Erik is also one of the staffer responsible for NORML’s legislative outreach, which includes working with state and federal legislators to encourage the introduction of marijuana reform bills, aid in their drafting, and organize grassroots support efforts. Other notable outreach projects include the establishment of NORML’s video channel, NORMLtv, compiling the group’s 2012 Voter’s Guide “Smoke the Vote,” graphic design for NORML’s promotional materials, and authoring NORML’s “We the People” White House petition for cannabis legalization.

How did you arrive at NORML?
I began interning at NORML in the early part of 2008 while attending college in Washington, DC. By my early years in college, like many other Americans of that age, I developed a close relationship with cannabis. I was studying philosophy and theology at the time and found utilizing cannabis could greatly expand the scope of my writing and help me pursue new, non-traditional avenues of thought. Beyond that, it worked phenomenally as a sensory enhancer for many of the activities I already enjoyed in life. As I spent more time thinking about it, I found utilizing cannabis could greatly expand the scope of my writing and help me pursue new, non-traditional avenues of thought. Beyond that, it worked phenomenally as a sensory enhancer for many of the activities I already enjoyed in life. As I spent more time thinking about it and continued living in a world where I was branded a criminal for what I chose to put in my own body, it created a dissonance that I could never quite correct. To me, it is primarily about cognitive freedom and my core belief is that it should be a guaranteed civil liberty to have autonomy over what goes on in my own mind. If my fellows could consume endless quantities of thought killing alcohol with little to no legal repercussions, why did I have to be live with the paranoia of jail time over carrying a small amount of marijuana?

As I began to have these internal discussions with myself, I sought out all the information I could find on our country’s drug policies, in particular our war on cannabis consumers. Between my own research, and word of mouth from some friends who attended a rally in Philadelphia, I came to discover NORML. I was initially drawn to the breadth and depth of resources they made available, but what really appealed to me was the group’s non-apologetic attitude toward the fact that not only did NORML represent the recreational cannabis consumer, but many of the employees had themselves used recreationally and were open about the fact. When I realized the national office was in DC, I immediately applied and then was accepted for an internship. After some months as an intern, I joined the staff in early 2009.

What are your responsibilities there?
My primary responsibilities are split into two categories: Communications and Chapter Organizing. As Communications Director, I have to wear many hats, but my primary mission is to make sure NORML’s message is being disseminated in the most broad, clear, and effective way possible. This ranges from managing NORML’s social media networks, daily contributions to the NORML blog, generating new graphics for outreach and fundraising, organizing grassroots campaigns in support of our efforts, coordinating with media contacts, and more. I also interface with elected officials, both at the state and federal level, to encourage them to introduce cannabis reform measures and to help support these efforts once they are introduced into their respective legislatures.

I share the duties of Chapter Coordinating with my coworker, Sabrina Fendrick. I oversee the Northeastern and Central Regions of the country and work to ensure our chapters can utilize the vast resources of the national office to further enhance their work. This includes using NORML’s online networks to promote their events, institutional support for their educational campaigns, providing general advice and direction, and facilitating discussions between the numerous groups nationwide.

You are one of the young bucks within NORML, an organization which some have described, as an “old boy’s network.” How do you counter those claims aside from being living proof?
If you look closely at just about any field of occupation, you’ll see this kind of insularity at the top. It certainly exists in drug policy reform in general, and by extension NORML, but it by no means defines the movement and those who still cling to some of these claims clearly aren’t paying much attention.

Aside from the simple fact that three out of the five full time staffers in Washington, DC are under the age of 30 and two of those three are women, a quick look at...
NORML’s recent projects and rising leadership shows that the times are changing. A primary example of this would be the NORML Women’s Alliance, which I personally believe has brought more fresh blood to the movement than any other singular effort in my time with drug reform. Through their projects, I have seen hundreds of inspiring, passionate women join the ranks as marijuana reform activists, and many of those who were already with us felt further empowered to speak out. NORML has, by far, one of the most extensive online networks in the movement, and that is made of hundreds of thousands of committed marijuana reformers, a huge number of which are in the age range of 18-34. Some of our most successful, active, and professional chapters are led by committed activists as young as their early twenties. These young activists are leading NORML chapters across the country, from New Jersey to Oklahoma to Texas, and are overseeing some of our most effective local organizing.

To think of NORML, or the marijuana movement, as a “good old boys’ club” is to focus on the past instead of looking towards the future. The marijuana movement is experiencing a cultural and generational shift, the demographics are changing. In the nearly five years of working with the organization I have seen more youthful, diverse, and driven individuals rise up and take active roles in the marijuana law reform community, and this trend will only continue. While like any other movement, we are looking a little grey and our institutional memory present in the organization I have seen more fresh blood to the movement than any other singular effort in my time with drug reform. Through their projects, I have seen hundreds of inspiring, passionate women join the ranks as marijuana reform activists, and many of those who were already with us felt further empowered to speak out. NORML has, by far, one of the most extensive online networks in the movement, and that is made of hundreds of thousands of committed marijuana reformers, a huge number of which are in the age range of 18-34. Some of our most successful, active, and professional chapters are led by committed activists as young as their early twenties. These young activists are leading NORML chapters across the country, from New Jersey to Oklahoma to Texas, and are overseeing some of our most effective local organizing.

What do you think has been NORML’s most important role with regard to legalization?

What I think NORML provides, that few if any other groups can, is a rallying point. After four decades of existence, NORML’s name has become synonymous with marijuana legalization and this longevity comes with distinct advantages. The institutional memory present in the organization is astounding, between Keith Stroup, Allen St. Pierre, and the countless chapter leaders and activists who have been in this fight for decades, the breadth of knowledge and experience seems never-ending. One of NORML’s most important roles has been to apply this experience to our efforts and to promulgate the information we’ve gained to the American public. By providing the latest news and science as it relates to marijuana policy and spreading it to the broad audience we’ve accumulated over years of work, we are continually striving towards our mission statement, which is to sufficiently move public opinion forward to achieve the legalization of marijuana.

Another role, that I don’t feel can be overstated, is the community that the organization provides to cannabis consumers around the country. By its very existence, NORML is shouting that there is nothing wrong with you because you chose to consume marijuana recreationally, it is completely normal and you are not alone. Through providing a sense of solace and community, NORML removes a degree of isolation that comes with being a marijuana consumer. Once they have discovered our work, we can bring them into our network and educate them on how to stand up for their rights and how to push for reform of the laws that have criminalized us. I’ve always felt the empowerment and knowledge we impart to everyday Americans is the most invaluable part of what we do. If we can keep one person out of prison because they understood the law or open one individual’s eyes to the follies of America’s War on Cannabis, then I have succeeded in my work.

Tell us what you both love and hate about the job.

Love: There is never a dull day. Advancements in marijuana law reform have only continued at an accelerated pace since I began my employment with NORML and it is exciting to be on the cutting edge of political discourse. When you consider the practical effects that these changes are having to families and individuals on the ground, the personal reward is another tenfold. It also feels exhilarating to have the wind at our backs with the renewed momentum we’ve experience after the election. Big things are coming and I’m happy, and incredibly proud, to be a part of it.

Hate: Dealing with all the media’s weed puns.

Tell us about some of the people within the organization who have inspired you.

I’ve been fortunate enough in my tenure to have who I consider to be three of the greatest minds on marijuana policy to mentor me along. It is very likely that none of us would be were we are today without NORML’s founder Keith Stroup. In addition to being the “grandfather” of the marijuana legalization movement, he also possess a keen eye for pragmatism and political sense like few others I’ve ever met. After decades of work in the field, he’s still the first one into the office every day and there are few others whose judgement on marijuana policy I’d hold in such high regard. Our Executive Director, Allen St. Pierre, is a walking encyclopedia of marijuana law reform, tireless advocate, and a limitless resource. Also, NORML’s Deputy Director, Paul Armentano, is constantly reliable for a reasoned perspective...
and invaluable advice.

Those that most impress me, though, are the hundreds of dedicated reformers and activists who spend countless hours out of their lives, without pay, to help bring rational reforms to their states and localities. Without these stakeholders getting involved and leading the charge, marijuana legalization would be much further off than it seems today.

Where do you see yourself ten years from now?
Personally, I hope to be booking a road trip across the country where I’ll finally be able to partake, legally, in my recreational substance of choice in all 50 of the states. Professionally, I hope to continue fighting the good fight at NORML. In the post-legalization world the consumer will still need reliable representation to ensure we receive the best quality product at the best quality prices and long before that becomes our primary concern we will need to shepherd the successful implementation of these new state regulatory systems for growing and dispensing cannabis.

What are some of the challenges we face, now that legalization seems inevitable?
The biggest challenge we face, with full legalization on the horizon, is not WHEN we will legalize the adult use of marijuana, but HOW we will do it. We’ve already begun to see some divisions in our movement, since as early as California’s Proposition 19 in 2010. Many of us are also aware of the “No on I-502” movement, championed by certain individuals in the medical marijuana industry, that attempted to defeat Washington’s legalization initiative this year. Our challenge, as a movement, is to unite instead of divide. Any law that leads to less of our cannabis consuming brothers and sisters being arrested and facing prosecution is one we should, and must, support. There is no such thing as perfect legislation, we mustn’t let the perfect become the enemy of the good. We need to keep in mind that most Americans are not daily cannabis users and this is all new and somewhat intimidating to them. As such, we need to tailor our approach in both messaging and practice to helping satisfy their concerns. Do we need a DUID per se standard? Do we need possession limits? Do we need to restrict home grow? Maybe, maybe not. The real question for now is, would the people pass a measure without them? We aren’t going to go from full on prohibition to the “tomato model” overnight, but each victory we achieve builds on the previous ones. It is this incremental approach of compromise and pragmatism that will lead us to ultimately crossing the finish line. Look at national polling over the past few decades, we are winning this war in the court of public opinion. We need to unite and bring more people into the fold. We can achieve this by listening to and addressing the legitimate concerns of the general public, and not overreaching just because the end is in sight.

BIO: Jil Staszewski received a Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology from Mercyhurst University (Erie, PA) in 2011. She became involved with NORML as an intern in the summer of 2011 prior to being hired full-time as the Membership Coordinator. Her hobbies other than working to reform marijuana laws include the drawing, painting, music, and spending time in nature.

How did you first get involved with NORML and has your experience so far been similar to what you expected starting out?
During my senior year in college I became inspired to pursue an internship in marijuana law reform. After studying drug policy and the history of prohibition academically, my eyes were opened to the severity of our country’s continued waste of resources, time and lives on the War on Drugs.

I felt drawn towards NORML’s mission and humanistic approach to reform and applied for an internship at the national office last summer, prior to obtaining my undergraduate degree. For the duration of my internship, I worked with Sabrina on various projects for the NORML Women’s Alliance. I was hired as the membership coordinator at the end of the summer.

By working at NORML, I have learned a lot regard-
ACTIVISM IS A RISKY and thankless endeavor that requires conviction, talent, courage and most importantly, integrity. It often attracts the best of humanity but, unfortunately also some of the worst. Many denigrate without offering up alternatives, others feign compassion while secretly vying for glory, and the worst among us are saboteurs, willing to undermine others’ efforts if it means furthering ambitions. That’s just within.

Legalization has already reaped benefits; just ask those in Colorado and Washington who had their charges dismissed almost immediately after the initiatives passed. Yet it also brings new players and challenges, with a lot more at stake. As the assholes multiply, the health of groups like NORML becomes even more vital in order to protect the interests of those who’ve had a stake all along.

The Continuing Story of Bungalow Bill

Written by Lennon while The Beatles were staying with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in Rishikesh, India, this song is about Richard A. Cooke III, a young and wealthy American who was visiting his mother, Nancy Cooke de Herrera, at Maharishi’s camp.

After Richard shot a tiger he saw attacking a pack of elephants, Lennon wrote the song to mock him. As he himself explained to Playboy, the song “was written about a guy in Maharishi’s meditation camp who took a short break to go shoot a few poor tigers, then came back to commune with God.”

Moral of the story: It doesn’t matter whose company you’re in or where you are, even in the holiest of places there will always be an asshole in the bunch.

I TYPICALLY RECEIVE ONE OF TWO POLAR OPPOSITE REACTIONS WHEN I DISCUSS MY JOB WITH OTHERS: ONE OF SINCERE APPRECIATION AND ADMIRATION OR ONE OF SHOCK AND/OR LAUGHTER.

-Staszewski

Would you draw any parallels between your good fight and the women’s rights movement of the early and mid-20th century?

Definitely. Our inability to utilize cannabis to our own benefit like we can with alcohol and cigarettes inflicts upon our own personal rights and freedom. As an adult of age who is allowed the expression of voting and given the right to play a role in making decisions on our country’s future, we should certainly be able to make choices about what we ingest in our own bodies that does not readily harm any other individual.

How do family and friends react to your involvement with NORML?

I typically receive one of two polar opposite reactions when I discuss my job with others: one of sincere appreciation and admiration or one of shock and/or laughter. Fortunately, I am lucky to have close family and friends who genuinely support my pursuit in this issue for which I’m passionate.

However, it’s not always easy. Some of my extended family members weren’t even aware of the true nature of what I do until very recently. This used to bother me quite a bit, but I’ve been learning to accept the fact that as long as I am content with myself, the unenthusiastic opinions of others are merely distractions and shouldn’t be taken personally.

One will always experience some sort of negativity no matter which path in life is taken, but ultimately, the most genuine fulfillment we will feel comes from honoring our own values, rather than pleasing others.

It’s difficult enough to get people to listen to and talk about cannabis law reform, have you ever found it even more difficult to be taken seriously and to gain respect simply due to gender or age?

Instead of viewing my age as a deterring factor in the
Having two states vote to end cannabis prohibition speaks to where a large portion of the country is on cannabis legalization and the changes in state laws now puts upward political pressure on federal government to, not try to put the genie back in the bottle, but acknowledge state autonomy, and allow the will of the voters to work its way.

Obviously, the conflict re federalism is no even more pronounced than it was with just medical cannabis laws circa 1996. No other place in the world have voters sought and gained the government imprimatur to officially end cannabis prohibition law, and replace them with more conventional tax-n-control models (similar to alcohol and tobacco models).

Once the laws kick in, and adults can lawfully purchase cannabis products, I think that CO and WA are going to become tourist havens in ways that Amsterdam and Jamaica have only dreamed of. With voters in WA and CO effectively ending criminal sanctions for cannabis—replacing sanctions with taxes and regulation—I think cannabis prohibition has largely come to an end in America.

FOUR OTHER CLEAR BENEFITS of the victories in WA and CO in my view is

1) that numerous federal legislators are now vying to work with law reform advocates to write and introduce tax-n-control regulations for the federal government and

2) foreign countries like Uruguay, Mexico, Jamaica and other central/south American countries have taken the legalization effort in the US to heart by introducing legislation that seeks to substantively reform their respective countries’ cannabis laws.

3) Major media outlets (ie, regional newspapers) have largely opined in favor of the voters’ will and/or encourage their state to stand up to any potential federal challenges.

4) All of the previous points has led to the governors of WA and CO to positively embrace the feds and get the feds to at a minimum take a ‘do nothing’ approach and let these states work their will re cannabis law reforms.

Executive Director
Allen F. St. Pierre’s general thoughts
post election

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