

IOWA'S LONELY BATTLE

He still yearns to reform laws on marijuana

By Jim Pollock

REGISTER STAFF WRITER

Carl Olsen got high on marijuana for the first time in 1968, and after that experience a question occurred to him: Why is this illegal?

Twenty-eight years later, Olsen is still waiting for the answer. More than that, he's still trying to help lead society to the legalization of marijuana -- but if the people of Des Moines are ever going to follow, they sure aren't in any hurry.

Which leaves Olsen, at 44, as a dedicated, politically aware, formerly incarcerated leader without much of a pack.

He's the most active one in Des Moines as far as know," said Chris Rice, 28, founder of the Quad Cities Coalition.

"He's the only person I hear from on this," said Sen. Elaine Szymoniak, D-Des Moines.

Derrick Grimmer, 49, comparing Olsen to his own role as the main representative in Ames for the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws, said, "Carl is more of a zealot, putting in a lot more time.

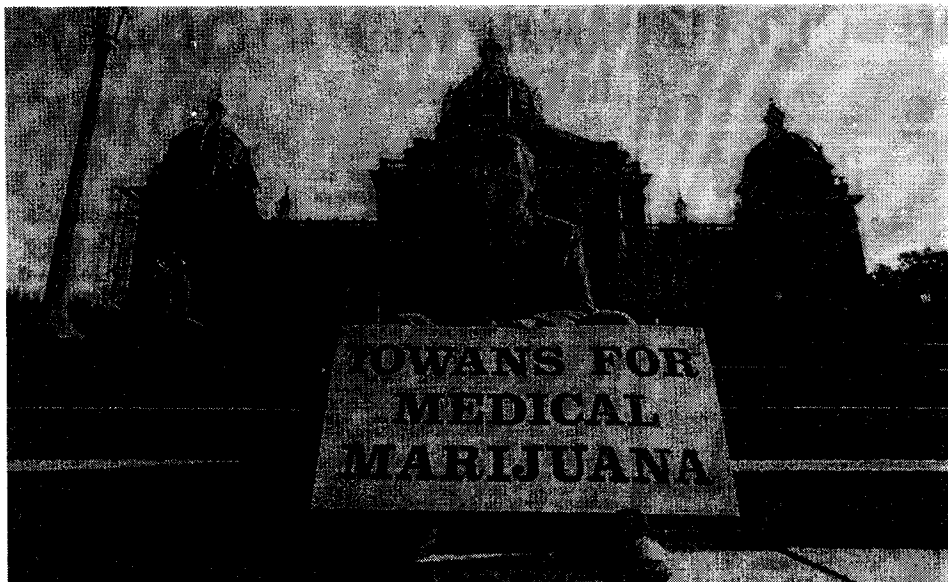
Not a Crowded Field

The field of reformers isn't exactly crowded in the Quad Cities, Ames and other Iowa cities, either.

Grimmer, a businessman, said, "I guess I am the Ames chapter of NORML," and noted that the pro-marijuana political party, the Grassroots Party, doesn't have any candidates to offer this year. "We're going to have to discuss what we're going to do," he said. "I'm tired of doing this by myself."

Olsen doesn't sound like he ever gets tired of the cause.

"The drug war is bankrupt and it's just a matter of time until they can't



DAVID PETERSON/THE REGISTER

Carl Olsen continue his lonely struggle to legalize marijuana, a cause he has supported for

the past 28 years. Today at noon he will be holding a rally at the Capitol in Des Moines.

Olsen wants Iowa Legislature to OK use of marijuana for medical purposes

continue it anymore," he said. "The change will come when people have had enough of drive-by shootings, the jamming of the court system and jails, and outrageous cases of long sentences for small amounts of marijuana."

Olsen has done time for large amounts of marijuana, and he's had enough of that. The government won that round. After 20 years as a user, Olsen says he has not smoked pot for six years because "I don't want to be harassed, have my files stolen or my car forfeited, and I don't want to bring heat on my friends."

Instead, he maintains a site on the World Wide Web -- which has been visited nearly 7,000 times in 3½ months, at last count -- writes letters to newspapers, shows a film, holds rallies for the medical use of marijuana -- there's one at noon today at the State Capitol -- and battles the government in court.

On one side: the U.S. Court of Appeals. On the other: Carl Olsen and his paralegal degree from Des Moines Area Community College.

It's a lonely battle.

Other believers are out there, though. The national office of NORML, in

Washington, D.C., reports that the organization has 6,500 paid members and 25,000 names on its mailing list, both record numbers.

Respected authorities lend some ammunition to the cause, too. Just last fall, the prestigious British medical publication, *The Lancet*, wrote an editorial that began, "The smoking of cannabis, even long term, is not harmful to health."

The *Journal of the American Medical Association* quoted the Drug Enforcement Administration's own administrative law judge as saying that marijuana is "one of the safest therapeutically active substances known to man."

Then there's the first page of the Bible, where it says that God gave the first man and woman "every plant yielding seed which is upon the face of the earth ... you shall have them for food."

"What gives anyone the authority to tell me what I can do with plants that God put here?" Olsen asked. "I have the same belief about carrots."

When it comes to the forces that have shaped Olsen's life, however, drugs play a more significant role than vegetables. After he graduated from Hoover High School, he found a whole new world of hallucinogenics at the University of

Iowa man still fighting for the legalization of marijuana

Iowa.

His shopping list included mescaline, speed and LSD, according to Olsen, and the result was not good. "In January of 1972, I wasn't eating or sleeping. I was losing weight, I was delusional. I had to quit," he said.

He Quit Some of It

He quit the other stuff, but he didn't quit the marijuana.

In the following years, Olsen was arrested in Ankeny, arrested in Muscatine and arrested in Newton. He finally moved to Florida to be part of the Ethiopian Zion Coptic Church where the predominant ritual was pot smoking.

He got arrested there, too, and finally went to prison in 1984. He spent two years behind bars.

Eventually, Olsen settled back in Des Moines and got a job with the Iowa Department of Transportation, where he still works. If you have an oversized load to move on Iowa highways, he makes sure you don't break the law.

On his own time, he fights to change the law.

It could be that smaller steps will have to be taken before society turns marijuana loose. Olsen already has argued that it should be permitted as part of religious ceremonies. He thinks hemp should be grown as a fiber crop, the way it was grown by American farmers during World War II when foreign supplies were cut off.

For now, he focuses on what looks like the easiest target -- the medicinal use of marijuana.

Olsen's legal fight with the federal government is over the question of rescheduling marijuana so that it could be prescribed by a doctor.

He also wants the Iowa Legislature to reintroduce a bill allowing medicinal use, and names Szymoniak as one of the most likely to support it if she wins re-election.

He can't expect her to take the lead, though. "I'm not going to do more than say it does help some people," Szymoniak said. "I wouldn't introduce a bill for medical use, not unless there was

more support. There's no reason to clutter up the process with bills that won't pass.

If Libertarian candidate Harry Browne is elected president of the United States, Olsen's worries could be over. Browne would release all non-violent drug offenders from prison and end the drug war, according to his campaign office.

If Browne should somehow lose to Bill Clinton or Bob Dole, Olsen will have to keep slogging along, doing his part, not expecting any more help than he's getting already.

"The marijuana movement has basically stratified into smaller organizations," said Chris Rice in the Quad Cities. "I like Carl personally, but we disagree over tactics. It's not a confrontational thing, we just approach things from different angles."

Derrick Grimmer still attends major events on the issue, but the last time he

was contacted by eager Iowa State University activists, "I told them, I'm kind of burned out on this with you student guys. The impetus is going to have to come from you. I'm not going to do it."

So the question is: Does this whole issue matter enough to Carl Olsen to keep him going on like this? "There's nothing else I think about," he said.

Ray Rosenberg was Olsen's lawyer back in 1979 and he has no doubt that his client was sincere in his arguments for the value of pot.

Rosenberg, 74, chuckles when he remembers one particular moment in the courtroom. "They asked him whether he thought children ought to use marijuana.

"Carl said, 'From cradle to grave.'"

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Pushing for Medicinal Marijuana



Barbara Douglass smokes marijuana at the State Capitol Sunday as Steve Ross helps her light up. Douglass of Storm Lake has federal permission to use the drug to relieve multiple sclerosis

symptoms. The Iowans for Medical Marijuana rally was held to protest the conviction of Allen Helmers, right, who uses marijuana for several medical conditions.

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