

Confessions of a San Francisco Marijuana Addict

By Chris Roberts

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Among the nurses in the AIDS ward at San Francisco General Hospital during the epidemic's nadir in the denial days of the 1980s, Steve K. stood out. "People always asked me how I stayed so calm, why nothing bothered me," he said Tuesday. The answer: he was stoned the whole time during his 35-year-long daily marijuana habit.

Being around dead and dying people — some of whom were also stoned after being gifted cannabis brownies by Mary Jane Rathbun, who was forced to volunteer at Ward 5 and Ward 86 as part of her probation for selling the same brownies in the Castro — wasn't what powered Steve's \$500-a-month cannabis addiction, he now says. But it was his mother's death about eight years ago that turned him onto harder stuff, and eventually led him to San Francisco's sparsely attended meetings of Marijuana Anonymous.

For whatever reason — he's not sure, and neither are doctors — Steve K., now 62 (who declined to give his full name or be photographed) is one of the roughly 10 percent of people who is addicted to cannabis. He's been sober about seven years, but pot blew up his life, and he wants to make sure people know it can blow up theirs, too.

Marijuana addicts fit no ready profile. The attendees of MA's five weekly meetings in San Francisco are mostly white, but range in age from 19 to 70. Researchers like David Smith, the addiction specialist and physician who founded the Haight Ashbury Free Clinic, believe that cannabis users who start in adolescence are more likely to get addicted.

But then there's Steve, who started at 20, and today, appears a healthy, kind-eyed, gray-haired retiree.

The realization that he was hooked came on gradually, he said in an interview Tuesday afternoon near his SoMa apartment (the same block as a pot club).

There was the fact that he was using every day, all day on the four days a week he wasn't working. There was picking smoking pot over seeing friends, and, when among real stoners, sneaking away in order to smoke even more. He also chose his habit over romantic partners. And then there was the New Year's resolution he found in an old notebook recently. "Smoke less pot," it said. But he didn't.

"I knew in my late 20s I was smoking too much and that I wanted to stop," he said. He managed to quit a few times, but never for more than a couple of days. "At some point I figured that this was gonna be my life — I was going to be stoned until the day I died."

These are all the hallmarks of addiction. While marijuana has the lowest addiction rate of the drugs used by most Americans (lower than nicotine, lower than alcohol), it still takes a human toll.

There's a saying: marijuana addicts have a "high bottom." For Steve, hitting bottom was being unable to quit. But weed use led to other bad things. For instance, he was \$22,000 in debt and he wasn't keeping appointments.

After his mother died, he started stealing medical-grade morphine and other drugs from the hospital where he worked. He knew he'd be caught — and he was. As part of his punishment he entered a treatment program. Narcotics Anonymous led to Marijuana Anonymous, and a realization that awareness that marijuana addiction is real is severely limited.

"It's weird. Obviously, there's a ton of pot smoked here — you smell it everywhere," he said. "I wish I could be one of those people who can smoke pot a bit on the weekends here and there. But for whatever reason, I can't. And there are other people like me."

He's ambivalent about marijuana legalization. He says he "could care less," but does say that putting fewer people in prison is a good thing. But there will be a cost.

"People need to hear: marijuana does help a lot of people. It has a lot of positive attributes. But for a small amount of people, it can cause a lot of problems. And I'm one of those people."