

Meeting presents NORML, negative views on marijuana

By Kate Gaul

The National Organization for Reform of Marijuana Laws is out to prove that marijuana users are normal, average people and not long-haired drug addicts they say the media has portrayed them to be.

Part of that information drive was a Midwest regional symposium last weekend in Omaha. Doctors, lawyers and legislators spoke on both sides of the marijuana issue. Twelve states and nearly 100 persons participated in the symposium.

"Marijuana is a relatively harmless recreational drug," said Keith Stroup, executive director of NORML.

NORML wants to provide role models to show the public that one can smoke marijuana and be a good citizen, Stroup said.

Stroup, an attorney, said the organization was founded in 1970 as a direct result of the consumer movement. In 1968, when he was graduated from law school, the country was in turmoil from the Vietnam War, Stroup said. Ralph Nader taught that the public has a voice in how products affect consumer's lives.

Inspired by Nader, Stroup founded NORML, believing that "the individual can have an impact," he said.

NORML is a national organization which lobbies for marijuana decriminalization and distributes information about marijuana.

Dorothy Whipple, a pediatrician and professor at Georgetown University, said marijuana probably is relatively safe.

Whipple, author of *Is the Grass Greener?*, cautioned that marijuana should not be smoked while driving or by women in the early stages of pregnancy. At one time, marijuana was thought to cause aggression in smokers. More recently, it was thought to cause laziness, she said.

Whipple said marijuana "offers a good deal of promise" in treating glaucoma, bronchitis and nausea for cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy.

Dr. Charles Levie, a psychiatrist and assistant professor at the University of Nebraska Medical Center, said marijuana "needs to be out of the killer weeds category and back into the medical field."

Detective Ralph Hitchins from the narcotics division of the Minneapolis Police Department, disputed the statement that decriminalization would save money in the court system.

He also said decriminalization laws foster a "disrespect for the law."

However, Richard Woods, an adviser in the Denver district attorney's office, said he believes excessive marijuana penalties would increase disrespect for the law.

State Sen. Patrick Venditte of Omaha said he believes it would be a "grave mistake" to lessen marijuana penalties in Nebraska.

He noted two major problems, the "widespread lack of knowledge" about marijuana and the "acceptance that it is innocuous."

Venditte said marijuana "must be presumed harmful until proven innocent."

However, Bill Craven, Kansas State NORML coordinator, noted "it is not the pot that is locked up, it is people and people are presumed innocent until proven guilty."

State Sen. John DeCamp of Neligh said his overall goal in introducing legislation to decriminalize marijuana in Nebraska is "effective law enforcement."

Judd Golden, attorney and Iowa NORML coordinator, said educating the public is a matter of "consciousness raising." He said the current consciousness-formulating attitudes on marijuana is based on the information disseminated in the

1930s when such movies as *Marijuana: The Assassin of Youth* were made.

Golden said marijuana legalization has a strong conservative appeal once the myths are exploded, because it is a matter of individual rights and a conservative battle-cry.

Stroup said marijuana users are not asking for any more rights than drinkers or tobacco smokers have.

Legalizing marijuana does not mean an individual would be free to abuse civil rights and infringe upon others, Stroup said.

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