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A different sort of graduation story



TIM SULLIVAN is a third-year law student and a Daily Nebraskan columnist.

My younger brother Kevin and I are both experiencing graduation of different types. Me from law school, him from a residential treatment program for drug and alcohol addiction.

Talk about extremes. Me from a school of law; my brother from a school of life.

His is the greater achievement by far. Last week, I helped my younger brother move out of Cornhusker Place Detox.

Cornhusker Place, you ask? You thought only people arrested for public intoxication and driving under the influence earned a visit to detox, right?

Wrong. They also have a long-term residential treatment program.

Kevin entered it last February, I think. I think it was February because in January of last year he was arrested for suspicion of driving under the influence. He refused the chemical test – the police report said he was hallucinating and combative.

It wasn't his first DUI. It was his second. And it was far from his first run-in with the law.

You see, Kevin's had a monkey on his back for 20-plus years.

He has a particularly persistent problem with his penchant for amphetamine-like substances.

I can't say with any degree of certainty just what it was that led Kevin down the path of self-destruction he was trapped on for so long.

I have my hunches, but they're just that – hunches.

Was marijuana use in his teen-age years a contributing factor?

Last fall, I wrote a column about the criminalization of marijuana. I argued that criminalization of possession of small amounts of marijuana is bad law.

I also said that I considered marijuana to be virtually harmless.

U.S. Bankruptcy Court Judge John Minahan read my column. I was taking his bankruptcy course at the law school at the time.

At the conclusion of the class session following the publication of "Reefer Madness," Judge Minahan told me that he had read my column, that there was something he wanted to give me and that he wanted it back.

With that, he left the lectern and walked across the room to where I was seated and placed on the desk in front of me a copy of "Pot Safari: A Visit to the Top Marijuana Researchers in the U.S." (Peggy Mann; Woodmere Press; 1982).

"Pot Safari" is Peggy Mann's account of her visits to the top marijuana researchers in the United States. It details the harmful effects associated with marijuana that the top researchers have uncovered.

After having read "Pot Safari," I think I have an obligation and a duty to my readers to present a summary of the alleged harmful effects of marijuana, I say "alleged" because I do not in any way vouch for the reliability of any of the studies, or suggest that any of the research was or was not performed in accordance with generally accepted scientific methods.

In other words, I'm not going to waste space debating the accuracy or reliability of these studies.

I'm just going to hit the high points (pun intended).

So here they are: the alleged harmful effects of marijuana.

The limbic area of the brains of marijuana smokers is damaged.

Synaptic vesicles functioning is impaired, slowing down the transmission of messages from one synaptic cleft to another. The passing on of messages from one nerve cell to another is the basis of all brain activity. This affects the reflexes you need to drive, or to do math, for example.

Brain-wave abnormalities persist even after discontinuing marijuana use.

Even some weekend smokers had abnormalities in this study.

The only thing I would say about this study, keeping in mind my own rule of not discussing the study's reliability or accuracy, is that the author suggests a link between abnormal brain waves and mental illness.

The problem I see with suggesting this connection is the lack of any research to support it, other than a visit to a mental hospital.

Marijuana smokers are amotivational.

This the author terms "dropout syndrome." Marijuana smokers care less about everything and everyone. They drop out of useful, productive activities like sports, drama club or the swim team.

Marijuana smokers harbor increased irritability and hostility.

Abrupt mood swings, ranging from a laid-back flat effect to sudden fits of rage, without a reasonable justification.

Marijuana smokers experience impaired short-term memory.

People in this study had difficulty remembering the phone numbers of their best friends.

Marijuana users suffer from an increased frequency of depression, suicidal feelings and actual suicide attempts.

The researcher here talks about the accumulation effect – THC that collects in and affects brain cells. This is all consistent with what the researchers call the "pot personality," meaning flat affect, irritability, hostility and depression.

Marijuana users inhibit their ability to get a "natural" high – in fact, they injure their ability to do so.

The brain produces endorphins, which activate neurotransmitters so that "pleasure messages" can be passed from one cell to another. THC irritates and damages the cells in the pleasure center of the brain – and destroys the endorphins.

Because endorphins are only stimulated by natural things – such as jogging, a beautiful sunset or music – the heavy marijuana user loses the ability to experience natural pleasures.

Lung damage from pot smoke comes about much faster and is much more severe than lung damage from tobacco smoke.

Marijuana smoke changes the normal arrangement of lung cells. The messed-up cells die, become part of the debris clogging up the tiny sacs in the small airways and block oxygen from getting into the lungs from the bloodstream.

Marijuana smoking has hidden detrimental effects to the lungs.

Marijuana smokers inhale deeply and hold it; cigarette smokers expel the smoke quickly.

Cigarette smokers snub out the butt end of a cigarette; marijuana smokers prize the "roach" end of a joint, considering it to be the best part, because the pot collects resins from the burnt matter that is smoked when the pot it collects on is burnt.

Holding in inhalations of marijuana smoke and smoking roaches leads to chronic, persistent cough and chronic bronchitis.

Marijuana speeds up the heart.

Average heart rates of 70 beats per minute increased to an average of 100 beats per minute while under the influence of marijuana. Blood pressure also increases significantly.

By increasing either the heart rate or the blood pressure, the heart's need for oxygen is increased. The marijuana smoke increases carbon dioxide in the blood, decreasing the available supply of oxygen.



MELANIE FALK/DN

Marijuana use disrupts menstrual cycles and increases the possibility of a high-risk pregnancy or no pregnancy at all.

Conception is delayed for three to five menstrual cycles for new users; at the time of menstruation, prolonged vaginal bleeding occurs, not followed by pregnancy.

The incidence of early spontaneous abortion, in utero fetal deaths, still-births and infant death just after birth is higher for pregnant marijuana users.

Male marijuana users experience a greater incidence of inhibited sperm maturation and infertility.

While most sperm looks plump and healthy under a microscope, the sperm of marijuana users looks abnormal. They're often misshapen, and they lack essential proteins, affecting fertility.

Marijuana damages the immune system.
The T-lymphocytes, which comprise about 70 percent of the lymphocytes in the body necessary to fight off invaders, are damaged. Their ability to multiply is diminished by marijuana use.

Marijuana use induces cellular damage in humans.

Humans with 46 chromosomes are normal. Even occasional smokers had reduced numbers – 20 to 30.

Corn has 20. Frogs have 25.

The researchers didn't state definitively that this chromosome damage would lead to obvious birth defects, but suggested, rather, that the defects may be subtle.

Well, now you have the other side of the argument regarding the dangerousness of marijuana.

You have to decide for yourself if any of the alleged dangers are risks you're willing to take for yourself.

If you're a parent, you should recognize that your children lack the maturity to make informed, rational decisions and that it may be necessary for you to shoulder the decision-making responsibility.

As a parent, you may even need to be hypocritical – you may decide that the risks are acceptable for you but that at least until your children are old enough and mature enough to make such important decisions for themselves, you have to protect them from things that could harm them.

So what does all this have to do with Kevin?

Well, there are a few other dangers to be aware of – not in regard to marijuana use – but having to do with drug and alcohol addiction generally.

Relationships with friends and family suffer.

Kevin has been alienated from his mother, father and all of his brothers and sisters for various amounts of time over the years. His drug

addiction led to stealing, lying and behaving aggressively in confrontational situations.

He was so bad two summers ago that I wrote a paper on

whether or not he could be involuntarily committed to a psychiatric hospital under the Nebraska Mental Health Commitment Act as a drug-abusing person dangerous to himself or others.

I was afraid he would kill himself. He injected himself with a crude form of bathtub crank – resulting in several trips to the emergency room and surgeries on the destroyed vein and muscles of his hands and forearms.

Lots of other things made me think he was sufficiently dangerous to himself or others to warrant commitment – but none of that really matters when you think in terms of the damage to the family unit.

The stress on everyone – his mother, father, brothers and sisters – was often so great that it contributed to arguments flaring up between everyone else about his problem.

A lot of blaming went on, and a lot of efforts to try to answer the "why" questions that flow so naturally from such horrific situations.

Kevin was in the residential treatment program at detox for around 14 months. That's his record for staying clean, at least in the past 20 or so years.

I've noticed a lot less conflict in my family as a result of his drug use as the time he stays clean increases.

So what am I saying? Did I go on so long that my point got lost?

Sorry.

Here it is: **Consider the physical and the social effects of drug and alcohol use.**

I think a lot of people are able to drink socially and use marijuana recreationally with little to no harmful effects on their lives.

If a person is able to be a social drinker or recreational drug user without detrimental effects on the ability to function, then perhaps no real harm is done.

But some people can't do that. For them, substance abuse is all-consuming; it controls every aspect of their life and personality. For these people, drugs and alcohol are certain disaster.

Even assuming there were no physical effects, the effects on social and family life should be a sufficient deterrent for those whose addictions permeate their lives.

I've thought a lot about drug and alcohol addiction over the years, partially because of Kevin, partially because of my work in the prison system and in part because of my own experiences.

Regardless of what anyone else gets out of this, I hope one message makes it.

Congratulations on your graduation, Kevin.