

Partial Transcript of the Beginning of Hour Two of 'Grass Roots to Grass Tops: Activists Effectively Working Together At All Levels' Panel at the 2006 National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws Conference, San Francisco, CA, 4/20/06—broadcast nationally on C-SPAN Radio, May 7, 2006 @ 10 AM (eastern).

(full transcript: <http://www.cannabismd.org/foundation/NORMLpanel1.php>)

Hear mp3s of full panel here:

Hour 1:

http://www.norml.org/audio/events/NORML_Con_GRASSROOTS_TO_GRASSTOPS_H_1.mp3

Hour 2:

http://www.norml.org/audio/events/NORML_Con_GRASSROOTS_TO_GRASSTOPS_H_2.mp3

(click this link for audio that follows along with text below)

Dominic Holden: Thank you Vivian. I went to a Drug Policy Reform Coordinating Group of King County meeting (it's a long name for a meeting, we know), and this guy showed up. Someone I'd never seen before. And everything he said was so on point, and he was so smart. And he seemed to have just come out of the ether. "Wow! Who is this guy?" And it wasn't until I read through a little of what he's doing and what he's done that it started to make sense. He's a fourth year M.D. and Ph.D. at the University of Washington's School of Medicine in Seattle, and he's an active member of Washington Physicians for Social Responsibility: He's a member of their board. Please welcome Sunil Aggarwal.

Sunil Aggarwal: Hello. I'm actually a student, I want to correct Dominic. It's really an honor to be here, to be a member of this panel, thank you for inviting me. You all are my inspiration and my teachers, many of the people here have really made it possible to speak. It gives me a sense of safety, and the folks in Seattle for sure have created an environment of safety and acceptability around marijuana issues.

What I'm going to talk to you a little about is something that a wise person once said: "Let your life be your argument". And so I'm going to tell you a little bit about what I'm doing and how I got there, and the people along the way who've helped to show me the wisdom.

So originally I'm an Okie from Muskogee, born and raised. As you all might remember that's the famous Merle Haggard song, which was a reaction to the sixties counter culture that Vivian was talking about. And where I grew up marijuana was a bad word, I mean a very, very bad word; a stigma through and through. It wasn't until many years after I left Muskogee, when I came to the University of California – Berkeley, across the bay here, that I learned what a complete fabrication and lie that had all been what was taught to me about that. So I have to give props to the bay area, right away, for teaching this "Okie from Muskogee" that marijuana is not this horrible, horrible thing, which is what we were taught in school. We sang that song in school too. We loved... we're so proud of it.

So it was actually at a students for sensible drug policy meeting at UC Berkeley, 2001, "What D.A.R.E. Didn't Teach You", that was what was put on by Scarlet Swederlow when she was a student there, she's now nationally involved in Students for Sensible Drug Policy, where I started to realize "Oh, wow! There's a lot here!" I had no idea. I had met Fred Gardner then too. Fred Gardner is a former editor, advisory board member of Scientific American and he writes O'Shaughnessy's, which is the Journal for the Clinical Cannabis physician's group here in California, and he told me... I was on my way to going to med-school then and he was like "Sunil, you know, you're just going to have to go there and tell them, tell your professors to put this in the

curriculum and tell them this is real medicine, this is real." And so that's really where it all started, it all started here.

So, I guess, In Seattle, I play a couple of roles, one as a medical student, as a health care worker in training, another role as a scholar, a student, I'm working on my PhD in the geography department, and a third role as an activist in the community with the Washington Physicians for Social Responsibility for the last couple of years. We are an organization that really wants to help create a healthy, peaceful, and sustainable world. It's very simple. We believe in nuclear non-proliferation, and we believe in cleaning up toxins from our environment – the right kind of chemicals. We believe in promoting non-violent solutions and a non-violent energy policy is what our major focus is these days. Since I've been the president of the organization for the last two years, we've signed on to Roger Goodman's King County Bar Association's Drug Policy Projects, we are a member of the "grass tops" groups that want to see change in drug policy at the Washington State Level. Just as alcohol prohibition fell before with states pulling out of this, that's what Roger Goodman's group is trying to recognize, the inherent amount of violence and problems to our youth that are caused by these policies and so I'm really happy to say that we're a part of that. So I speak on that note.

As a medical student, I have the great honor of meeting people, working with doctors in Seattle, like Dr. Gregory Carter, who's a professor of physical and rehabilitation medicine in Seattle at the University of Washington. He has totally been a great mentor for me and led the way. He has written a paper, "Rational Guidelines for Dosing", which is used in court cases to help judges and lawyers understand exactly how cannabis can be used medicinally. I've had opportunities to see patients with him in the clinic, and to actually see firsthand exactly how a cannabis recommendation happens, how it helps patients' health-related quality of life . . . I mean it's remarkable. So I totally stand on the backs of all these great people like Dr. Carter.

As a student, I should say that if there are any students out here or listening at home on their radios, they should know that any time you have an opportunity to do a research topic or pick a paper topic to write on, this is a great way to raise the issue, by talking about a cannabis related issue, in your work. That's something that I've tried to do with my PhD, is to dig deeply into cannabis and cannabis-related issues. And start to look at it as actually a part of our environment. I think this is, with my work with Washington PSR, I've learned that you can actually connect cannabis issues to the environment. It's another plant just like we protect our rivers and our streams and things like that, this is part of our environment, and we have to make peace with it. So I recommend all students out there to pick research topics like that and to educate your own classmates on these types of issues.

I have to say it's been a really difficult process for me to come out of the closet to talk about these issues. If it wasn't for folks like this, and Mikki Norris and Chris Conrad's website cannabisconsumers.org I would have never really felt the courage to do this – but there's a message that keeps ringing in my mind, which is leverage your privilege, it doesn't exactly rhyme, but I don't know what it's there for, if not to make a change, and the more of us that stand up, and recognize that we are given or handed certain privileges in our society, the more we can realize this is a complete farce.

As a person in medicine, I feel that doctors and physicians have really shirked a lot of their responsibility on this issue, I mean when we had it in our formulary in the United States, from the mid 1840's to 1941, cannabis as a medicine, there were multiple pages of indications, and that completely all of a sudden those indications don't exist anymore? Did the plant's genetics change? Did it's mechanism of action change? Did people just stop responding to it? I mean why would we all of a sudden become mum about it? I think that there has been a complete shirking of our recognition on that point, we should all call it for what it is: it is a medicinal plant, a legitimate medicinal plant, or what the F.D.A. would call a botanical medicine. We understand these things. These aren't crazy far out concepts; this is stuff that we're using in medicine today,

and we have for a long time. I think doctors and physicians need to cut through that and recognize it for what it is.

Given the climate that we have, we have a situation where the doctors cannot, in the eleven states where it is allowed in this country, they can recommend it, but they can't be around it. How many times, how many medicines have you ever seen where the doctor is not allowed to touch the medicine to give to the patient? How are we supposed to administer it? It's just completely the most insane idea. When you have the W.H.O. has recognized cannabis is a medicine, several countries around the world have recognized it as a medicine. What I call this is American Federal Denialism of cannabis as a medicine.

And then certainly we have been talking about moral issues. There's something called moralism and I think that moralism is also part of our definitions of mental disorders. Cannabis abuse, marijuana abuse that Vivian talked about, there's actually . . . if you look in the D.S.M., I'm going to be talking about this tomorrow on a panel. There's an incredible amount of moralism that goes on if you read people's understanding of what it means to have a cannabis abuse disorder. The idea there is that you must be completely crazy to use cannabis because it's illegal. Or you must be on your way to becoming crazy. When I say "crazy" I mean mentally disordered. And these aren't things that we should throw around lightly, mental disorders have been thrown around for a long time and as everyone knows homosexuality was in the D.S.M. until 1973. And you know I was just reading a little history of Seattle, people were lobotomized in the western psychiatric institutions of Washington State because they had an "antisocial personality-disturbance". That's how homosexuality was understood. I feel really happy talking about that here in San Francisco, which is completely a bastion of safety on these issues.

Well that's part of the moralism that I want to address as well in my work, and I guess to wrap up I'll just say it's a complete honor to be on this panel with these folks, and I hope for a future where cannabis mythology and cannabiphobia is completely eradicated. Thank you very much.

Dominic Holden: I like the word cannaphobia. You all will be happy to know that my frontal lobe is still intact. They didn't get me. At least not yet.