

CLOSING RANKS: MARIJUANA CULTURE AND DOMESTIC ABUSE

By Kym Kemp

“Shhh, don’t tell or we’ll all get in trouble.”

Growers close ranks when dealing with the straight world. Bonded together into a solid, almost impenetrable wall by a common fear of authorities, the different faces of the marijuana culture are much richer and more varied than most people realize. But, while fragmented into distinct social groups such as Rastafarians, indoor cowboys, etc., growers—big and small—are united by more than just producing an illegal product, they are united by a common need for privacy and secrecy. Unfortunately, these needs can aggravate the larger, society wide problem of domestic abuse.

According to Mary Balletta, Director of Services for Wish Foundation [Women and Children's Crisis Shelter in Southern Humboldt] “Domestic abuse doesn’t discriminate—not [by] gender, not by certain economic groups, and not by marijuana growers or not. In fact, in my experience, marijuana tends to attract very peaceful people but

there is a negative element of people who have...their own fear base...In an alternative economy, with fear of police coming down the driveways [the need for control sometimes increases.]” And domestic abuse is often about control.

Balletta explained that the marijuana culture has certain elements that can intensify an abusive situation. Three of the main components are isolation, untraceable money, and closing ranks—turning in one person means turning in a community.

Physical distance from neighbors and family is not the only form of isolation. Growers, whether rural or not, face some social seclusion because of their work in an illegal business. The abuser can use the need for secrecy to segregate the victim. “You can’t have people over because I have a grow room in the garage...” or “you can’t go visit your mother because she’ll smell marijuana on you.” Or even, “You can’t leave me because I’ll turn you in for growing.”

Economic dependence, a hallmark of abusive relationships, is deepened

by the fact that money within the growers’ culture is, by necessity, untraceable. With those who live legally, much of what a partner makes is documented and thus available for child support and a divorce settlement. In the alternative economy of a marijuana grower, this isn’t true. Even if a partner makes large sums, the money is hidden and the victim may have no way of gaining access to even a small amount.

Balletta relates the story of one woman.

She and her partner had moved into a small cabin without power in the hills above Garberville. “The woman wanted to be living a happy, healthy, organic lifestyle...” but the partner began drinking, abusing her, and leaving her at home alone with the kids for extended periods. One day, he went to town in their only vehicle and stayed on a binge for several days, leaving her trapped without enough food to feed the kids or enough clean clothes.

The woman was afraid to leave (and had no vehicle anyway). What little money they had came from marijuana sales. She knew she would be unable to get a share of it at harvest if she left now. How would she care for her kids if she left? How could she afford a home for them?

This situation isn’t uncommon apparently. Often between the male abuser and the female victim, Balletta says, “...the mother is a servant or a child or the man’s possession. The man makes all the decisions—she is working for subsistence.—room and board....The [women] don’t believe they can support themselves ...”

In fact, there is a perception among some segments of the marijuana culture that many female partners of growers have no skills and virtually leech off the male grower. This can be seen in an online discussion following an article in the Willits News (April 24, 2009) about a situation in which a man accused of assaulting his female partner and “knocking her to the ground” was subsequently arrested for

marijuana cultivation by police investigating the alleged assault. An anonymous commenter maintained, “I have learned long ago just because some chick kicks and screams about something doesn't make it true. Willits is full of young, lying untalented hos, bouncing from grower to grower with no life or careers of there[sic] own. He must have not given her 50% of his grow or something.” These women, in the commenter’s view, have no skills of value other than their sexual appeal. The commenter reduces them to mere unpleasant additions in the male grower’s life.

Nonetheless, there is some truth to his accusations. Some male growers have been known to stay with and even marry emotionally abusive partners in order to avoid the possibility of being turned in. Dave, a handsome blond man who lives on a farm full of pets-- including nearly a dozen well-behaved dogs, speaks with great pain of a former

relationship. “She didn’t know how to take care of herself. I didn’t know how to take care of myself.

A former activist for environmental and social causes, Dave had been arrested multiple times for civil disobedience so he allowed all the money they made to be put in his partner’s bank account. “I’d never had any money... never paid any taxes... She wanted to control the money. I didn’t care. I just wanted the bills paid.” They bought a house in town for an indoor grow and the money became tight. Leta, his partner, became emotionally abusive—calling him names and insulting the one skill he was proud of—his growing abilities.

Leta also began “dramatic grieving—screaming and crying” and “inducing asthmatic attacks” whenever Dave seemed remote from her. She would ask him if she was sexually attractive to him, if he didn’t respond correctly, she would begin wailing increasing the noise until she got the result she wanted. This would draw attention in the town. As a

grower, he couldn’t afford the notice of outsiders. “[I would] get down on my knees begging her to stop...” Often times she would go outside upping the ante as more neighbors could hear her wail and increasing the chance of police involvement.

Dave explained that Leta was beautiful but “I found myself having sex with her just to keep her quiet...This is like having sex with a butcher block.” Ashamed, Dave puts his hand up and roughly wipes at his eyes. “God, this is just pathetic.” After a bit, he continues his voice breaking, “[I asked her] could we just break up? I’ll pay you when the crop comes in.” He mimics her voice. “I’m not leaving ‘til I get my money.”

Dave moved out to the land living with little more than a solar panel feeding one light in a van. He stayed away working his crop. He paid two women (on speculation when the harvest came in) to stay with her and keep her entertained. Eventually, he was able to give her \$25,000 as her share and she went away happy but

he still bears the emotional scars.

Getting counseling or calling in authorities is fraught with risk. The illegal business could be discovered, crops could be lost, and everyone could face arrest—not just the active participants but also their neighbors could be drawn down into the morass of legal attention. Thus calling in authorities or outsiders is considered the ultimate sin. Karol Andersson, assistant editor at the McKinleyville Press and a student at Humboldt State, relates an incident that happened a while ago.

“A young mother I knew

showed up at the preschool to drop off her child. She was sporting a huge shiner. Her “partner” .. had punched her during an argument. I was appalled. “Did you call the cops?” I asked. She said, “I can’t. He has a scene.” I was unsympathetic; I replied, “If he has a scene, then he should keep his nose clean.”

Andersson continues, “These things have always bothered me about the in-





DAVE WITH HIS DOGS

between WISH and the Humboldt County Sheriff's Office "is good. They don't come down the driveways looking for pot."

There is a story persistent in grower lore of a Southern Humboldt

woman who, after being viciously attacked by her partner, ran to a neighbor's house for help. The neighbor let her call 911 but, when officers showed up, they were more interested in busting the neighbors for their grow than finding the abusive partner of the woman. When asked about this, Ballesta insists Humboldt County police work well with WISH and she says firmly, "I've been here 7 years and never ran into that."

While her experience in Humboldt correlates with online research which does not show any arrests for marijuana cultivation after a domestic abuse situation in the area, other areas throughout California and the greater United States have different standards. For instance, Mendocino County sheriffs have arrested several suspected growers recently because of domestic abuse investigations that led to marijuana cultivation sites. One case happened in May, officers were dispatched to a home after meeting with a woman in an ambulance who reported leaving with her children after being head-butted by her husband. The alleged attack resulted in a severe laceration and swelling. At the home, officers discovered an indoor marijuana grow and seized nearly 300 plants. Another such case is discussed in the article in the April 24th edition of the Willits News men-

dustry. Social ills surround it. And children grow to adulthood while solutions never even get discussed, much less set into place. Families can't turn to the authorities for assistance because of the taboo on anything that even remotely resembles snitching. The taboo against snitching is, apparently, bigger than the one against... beating your wife."

However, the young mother in Andersson's story has worries that may be real. The taboo against going to authorities may or may not be based on reality of actual police action. Ballesta states firmly that the relationship

tioned above. In fact, one of the comments on the article implies the victim of the alleged abuse was targeted by the police. "She has also been arrested for growing pot, which is a much sadder tale."

Thus, the young mother in the story above may have ended up being charged with marijuana cultivation should she have attempted to report the violence against her. However, Lt. Noe of the Mendocino County Sheriff assured me that they "prioritize domestic abuse above and beyond any pot growing."

The obstacles to getting out of an abusive relationship within the marijuana culture can seem overwhelming. Nonetheless, Ballesta makes clear that the benefits generally outweigh the problems. The woman she spoke about earlier who was trapped in the cabin in the woods made the decision to call WISH. "Soon her children were bathed and in bed without worrying about being abused... She stays at Wish, gets an apartment in another town... She's never been happier... She goes to college, her children have a stable home---she's not worrying anymore."

Leaving isn't easy

though. Ballesta says, "There is a crisis point when the victim wants to leave ... [the victim] can be hurt and killed if they do leave" because the abuser (male or female) gets desperate at the thought of losing their partner." She offers some advice, "It takes planning. Recognize your abuse [see boxed information]. And then attempt to break free

"We put you in a situa-

tion to get you on your feet so you can decide what is your true intention in life for your own happiness and your children's." WISH in Southern Humboldt, like many crisis shelters, provides a secret, secure home to protect the victim and their children. The volunteers at the center help with getting state aide and grants for college or with getting jobs and moving--whatever is needed.

Ballesta makes sure to point out that domestic abuse happens both within and without the marijuana culture. And, she says, help comes from both sides of the cultural divide in Humboldt. "This is a community blended here from straights and from the marijuana culture that values protecting women and children.... Wish is very special here. Very few communities can start up a help shelter for themselves but we did."

However, though Southern Humboldt is unique in that its shelter operates with private funding, most communities have some sort of state funded crisis shelter that will assist families in need.

Ballesta finishes her account by saying, "This is part of the nature of [the marijuana] community. ... No one wants to ask for help. [There is] such a need for privacy." Still, the grower community and the greater community can close ranks between the victim and the abuser--helping provide a safe place for healing and for moving on.

THOSE IN HUMBOLDT WISHING TO VOLUNTEER OR DONATE CAN CONTACT WISH AT 707 223 0043. THE OFFICE NUMBER AT 707-923-4100,

IF YOU AND YOUR FAMILY ARE EXPERIENCING CRISIS, PLEASE CONTACT WISH AT 1 800 211 1188 OR A SHELTER IN YOUR OWN COMMUNITY.

What can I do to help?

You suspect that your friend is in an abusive relationship. Here are some things to consider:

- Think about your relationship with your friend. When and where might you talk with her safely, and what could you say?
- Ask questions that let her know of your suspicions and concern.
- When she talks about the situation, believe what she says and validate her concerns.
- Help your friend make use of local resources.
- Work with your friend to develop a personal safety plan.
- Help her prepare to leave if the danger and abuse escalate.

source: <https://www.health.harvard.edu/fhg/updates/update1006d.shtml>

Recognizing Domestic Abuse

Here are warning signs that a mate or date may be a potential or actual abuser. 2

- Jealousy of your time with co-workers, friends, and family.
- Controlling behavior. (Controls your comings and goings and your money and insists on "helping" you make personal decisions.)
- Isolation (Cuts you off from supportive resources, such as telephone pals and colleagues at work.)
- Blames others for his or her problems. (Unemployment, family quarrels -- everything is "your fault.")
- Hypersensitivity. (Easily upset by annoyances that are a part of daily life, such as being asked to work overtime, criticism of any kind, being asked to help with chores or child care.)
- Cruelty to animals and children.

(Insensitive to their pain and suffering, may tease and/or hurt children and pets.)

- "Playful" use of force in sex. (May throw you down and hold you during sex. May start having sex with you when you are sleeping or demand sex when you are ill or tired.)
- Verbal abuse. (Says cruel and hurtful things, degrades and humiliates you, wakes you up to verbally abuse you or doesn't let you go to sleep.)
- Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde personality. (Sudden mood swings and unpredictable behavior -- one minute loving, the next minute angry and punitive.)
- Past history of battering. (Has hit others but has a list of excuses for having been "pushed over the edge.")
- Threats of violence. (Says, "I'll slap you," "I'll kill you," or "I'll break your neck.")
- Breaking or striking objects. (Breaks your possessions, throws objects near or at you or your children.)
- Uses force during an argument. (Holds you down or against a wall, pushes, shoves, slaps, or kicks you. This behavior can easily escalate to choking, stabbing, or shooting.)

When domestic violence occurs, it often follows a pattern of three stages: 3

- It starts with a build-up of tension -- criticism, yelling, swearing, using angry gestures, coercion, threats.
- This leads to physical or sexual attacks or threats of attack or other punishment. The perpetrator's rage is out of control.
- The final stage is seduction -- the perpetrator apologizes, blames the behavior on being drunk, promises to change, gives gifts. This reinforces the victim's hope for a healthy, loving relationship and allows the cycle to be repeated.

Source: <http://www.hq.nasa.gov/office/ospp/>