

California Medical Marijuana Activist Facing Federal Prison Time Commits Suicide, Commemorative Vigils Set for Tuesday

David Borden, Editor; Drug War Chronicle #395; 2005-07-15

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Long-time San Diego medical marijuana patient, provider, and activist Steven McWilliams killed himself Monday night. McWilliams had been fighting federal charges for growing 25 plants in his yard for the Shelter from the Storm Collective and faced a looming six-month federal prison sentence. Since that arrest in 2002, McWilliams, who suffers chronic pain from a series of auto accidents, was unable to use his preferred pain reliever, medical marijuana, for fear of being jailed.



Photo: Steve McWilliams;
by San Diego IndyMedia

"Steve had been depressed and in terrible pain, and been hospitalized last week," said his friend David Bronner of Dr. Bronner's Magic Soaps. "Steve's depression was apparently a combination of dread of going to jail in light of Raich [the recent Supreme Court decision allowing federal prosecution of medical marijuana patients and providers in states where it is legal] and his deteriorating health." "He had postponed our last couple of dinner dates because of the pain, and was going up to LA to see a specialist to change his pharmaceutical regime," Bronner told DRCNet.

"Steve was a courageous fighter for the cause and will be sorely missed. Our deepest sympathies to his partner, Barbara MacKenzie," said [California NORML](#) head Dale Gieringer in a brief statement.

McWilliams was a highly committed activist. In addition to operating the patients' collective, which was recognized as legitimate and in compliance with state law by the city of San Diego, he was a vital member of the task force whose recommendations led to San Diego becoming the largest city in the country to establish medical marijuana guidelines.

"Steve was a real hero in struggle, putting his body and soul into opposing the machine, trying to open up space and freedom for everyone," said Bronner. "He was profoundly conscious and kind, and was courageous and raging in his activism against apologists for societal status quo crap. By a longshot, he more than anyone made the guidelines happen in San Diego, conservative and big as it is, right on the border with all kinds of federal opposition. He was constantly and literally in city council's and the police department's faces, demanding they uphold the will of the people and implement 215. He was involved in progressive struggles across the board."

His last bust, in September 2002, reeked of retribution for his activism. That month, McWilliams led a public handout of medical marijuana to patients at city hall. Shortly thereafter, the US Attorney's Office in San Diego warned him to destroy the collective's garden or face prosecution. That same week, he was raided by the DEA. The next month, he was arrested and faced up to 40 years of federal time on marijuana cultivation and distribution charges. He pleaded guilty to a lesser charge and was sentenced to six months, but had been free pending an appeal -- one that had been held up as the courts waited for the Raich decision.

His work in San Diego also won him the respect of city officials. "Steve was a really compassionate guy who worked hard for people who were very sick. I never doubted his sincerity," said City Councilwoman Toni Atkins, who once described him as "a hero" for his efforts. "I think it's really, really sad," she told the San Diego Union Tribune.

The medical marijuana defense organization [Americans for Safe Access](#), or ASA is calling on local activists across the nation to organize vigils to commemorate McWilliams' life and honor his work this coming Tuesday, June 19. If you are interested, e-mail ASA's Rebecca Saltzman at rebecca@safeaccessnow.org or call (510) 251-1856.

The organization is also asking supporters to write letters to McWilliams' partner, Barbara MacKenzie, at: 4763 Wilson Avenue, San Diego, CA 92116.

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