

ader

Thu Apr 20 17:47 page 1

SLUG FROM MOVED STATUS TIME
 BC-LIFE-MARIJUANA 04-20 0 3933 RTareutear 04/20/00 17:44:50 WIRE 3:32
 =====
 BC-LIFE-MARIJUANA 04-20 0631
 BC-LIFE-MARIJUANA

U.S. marijuana advocates celebrate new holiday

By Andrew Quinn

SAN FRANCISCO (Reuters) For legions of marijuana smokers around the United States, Thursday marked "420" -- an increasingly above-ground holiday dedicated to celebrating the culture of cannabis and the joys of the joint.

At mountaintop gatherings, parlor-room pot parties, woodland retreats and secret basement jamborees, people gather at 4:20 p.m. on April 20th (4-20) to light up marijuana cigarettes and share the sacrament of smoke.

"What this is is the spontaneous birthing of a new ritual," said Steven Hager, editor of High Times, a national magazine which covers the cannabis subculture. "It represents the fact that the counterculture has become a legitimate minority group."

What started three decades ago as code for daily after-class smoke sessions at one San Francisco area high school has morphed into a national phenomenon, generating T-shirts, buttons, bumper stickers and Internet chatrooms devoted to the pleasures of pot.

"There's no doubt what the code means," said Keith Stroup, executive director of the Washington, D.C.-based National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws (NORML).

"For people who smoke marijuana, it's the equivalent of what a beer drinker means by 'it's Miller time,'" Stroup said. "Kick back, relax, and light up a joint."

It is also, according to proponents, time to get organized to fight what they call repressive drug laws.

"Young people see 420 as an act of defiance, a symbol of freedom. It's like bra burning was in the 1960s," said Dennis Peron, a veteran medical marijuana campaigner who ran on a pro-marijuana platform in the 1998 California governor's race.

"Four-twenty ... why not? We don't have anything else. We are looking for a symbol of repression. Remember, every day thousands of people get arrested for smoking pot."

Peron is one speaker at San Francisco's Fourth Annual 420 Hemp Fest, one of a number of activities scheduled around the country to mark the day.

At Mount Tamalpais in nearby Marin County, and at Overlook Mountain in New York, pot smokers planned ritual gatherings. And in Washington D.C., legalization activists planned to launch fund-raising activities for their annual Fourth of July smoke-in in front of the White House.

While 420 has influenced the pot-smoking public, until recently few people knew where the idea came from. Like any good story involving recreational drug use, it has prompted a rash of urban myths -- with people saying the numbers represented anything from police code for "drug bust in progress" to the number of chemical components in cannabis.

Hager, who first heard about 420 and began popularizing it nationally in the late 1980s, said he had been able to trace the term back to "the Waldos", a group of friends at San Rafael

ader

Thu Apr 20 17:47 page 2

High School north of San Francisco, who in 1971 would gather to smoke marijuana near the school's statue of Louis Pasteur every day at 4:20 p.m.

With a helpful boost from pot-smoking fans of the rock band the Grateful Dead, the term took off and is now widely recognized around the United States and, increasingly, in other parts of the pot-smoking world.

Hager said the quasi-religious nature of 420 could help to cut through some of the grimmer associations of April 20, which is also the anniversary of Hitler's birthday and the deadly 1999 attack by teen-age gunmen on students and teachers at Colorado's Columbine High School.

"In future this is going to go down as the stoner holiday, nothing sad," Hager said.

"The synchronicity of everything is so strange. ... It falls right around Passover, and the Last Supper. What 420 really represents is this new spiritual culture and a way for people to communicate with each other without fear."

REUTERS