



Waldos Mark Gravitch (right front), Larry Schwartz (middle) and Dave Reddix at Dominican College in San Rafael, getting high and playing Frisbee, circa 1972-73.

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Meet the Waldos: the true story of the Marin stoners who coined '420'

BY ELISSA EINHORN | APRIL 19, 2018

“Today we have an interview with the J. because 47 years ago, we smoked a ‘j.’”

So says Steve Capper, one of five former San Rafael High School students who coined the term “420” (pronounced “four-twenty”), which became synonymous with cannabis culture and is today an unofficial holiday celebrated on April 20.

The year was 1971. The Marin County high school was typical of many California schools of the era, with long-haired hippies, jocks, cheerleaders and greasers roaming the campus. But at San Rafael High, so did the **Waldos**, a group of guys who could be found off to the side, sitting against a wall near a Louis Pasteur statue. Joining Capper were Mark Gravich and Larry Schwartz (all three of them Jewish), plus Jeff Noel and Dave Reddix.

“There was a strong element of the early ’70s, which was an extension of the late ’60s — the Grateful Dead, Jefferson Airplane — they all moved to Marin County. The counterculture evolved from there,” Capper said. “There was definitely a cultural explosion of music, arts and crafts, marijuana and other drugs.”

Pot smoking aside, the Waldos did not see themselves as typical stoners but rather as “motivated, creative, active ... and educated,” according to their website. And, above all, they were social satirists who really were interested in one thing.

“We were comedic desperados,” Reddix said. “We made fun of everybody, but not in a malicious way. We just cracked each other up. Our main goal was to make each other laugh.”

Then one day a friend gave Waldo Steve a treasure map, which reportedly led to a small crop of marijuana growing on federal property. Once the map fell into the hands of the Waldos, they decided to meet at 4:20 p.m. every day after school, get high and search for that patch of land.

“It was like the Jews running around the desert, except we weren’t in Israel. We were running around the windswept Point Reyes Peninsula,” said Capper, whose parents were members of San Rafael’s Congregation Rodef Sholom for nearly 60 years (and whose mother was a local matchmaker).

The secret code “420” entered the Waldos vernacular, and before they knew it, everyone else’s. It was one of many catchphrases they have coined over the years. Others include “Zoit,” which represented the sounds Capper would hear from behind the shop classrooms where he went to get high, and “Eyot,” which came to mean “Isn’t that weird?”

“420 was the tip of the iceberg,” Capper said.

Unfortunately, as the term “420” spread, so did “420 claimers” who sought to take credit. Some Photoshopped 420 onto pictures in an attempt to revise the date of the term’s creation, while some spread other falsehoods about its origins. The most common myth: that it was police code for a marijuana bust.

“ 420 was the tip of the iceberg.

To preserve their true story, the Waldos have collected documentation that has been authenticated by several media sources (they’ve been interviewed many times in the past 20 years, including by [Time magazine](#) and the BBC).

Proof includes a 1970s-postmarked letter between Capper and Reddix referencing 420. Another letter from a mutual friend who headed to a kibbutz in Israel complained, “No 420 here.” There’s even a 420 flag created by a friend, circa 1970s, emblazoned with a large cannabis leaf and a 420 overlay, plus that famous “Eyot” across the top. 420’s Waldos history also is listed in the [Oxford dictionary](#) and is on [Wikipedia](#). The group’s historical records sit in a vault in San Francisco’s Wells Fargo headquarters to protect it from contingencies, such as flood, earthquake or — ahem — smoke damage.

“Steve and I are managing partners of Waldo, LLC, and decided to get a safe deposit box if any of those contingencies happen,” said Reddix. “We both hold a key to the box in case he or I croak.”

What has already croaked is Waldo Steve’s 1966 Chevy “safari mobile,” which he describes as a very “uncool” four-door, hand-me-down Impala that the Waldos piled into and cruised to the tunes of Van Morrison, the Allman Brothers, Merle Haggard, Commander Cody and other music of the time.

“With gas at 35 cents a gallon, you could fill up the car for \$7 and drive to L.A.,” said Reddix. “There was a killer eight-track stereo with different lights. When the car filled with smoke, it was like a light show.”

When a movie is made about 420 — several producers have approached the Waldos but none have been the right fit — Capper jokes they’ll have to locate another Impala.

What they managed to find after six years of searching is the creator of the original treasure map, Gary Newman. When Waldos Steve and Dave met the former Coast Guardsman in 2016, they found someone Capper described as “a gentle soul, living on and off the streets,” and proof that the map was no myth.

Nearly five decades after they sat together against the high school wall day after day, all five wisecracking guys, now in their mid-60s, remain in Sonoma and Marin counties. Reddix, a field producer for CNN for 15 years, is now an independent filmmaker. Capper specializes in commercial business lending. Gravich is a photographer, Schwartz is in the printing and graphics business, and Noel does marketing for the Sonoma wine industry.

The Waldos see each other frequently, and will gather again on Friday, April 20 for a promotional party celebrating the release of a 420 commemorative pen. Their tradition of never making any money off their legacy continues, with all proceeds going to the [Drug Policy Alliance](#).

Reddix, who is quick to declare, “We’ve never advocated the use of marijuana, especially for children,” is also quick to add, “But, hey, it worked for us.”



The Waldos reunited