LOCAL // BAY AREA & STATE

Heads of the class: High school kids created 420 decades ago — now they tell the tale

Carolyne Zinko | April 20, 2018 | Updated: April 20, 2018 8:52 a.m.

Dave Reddix (left), Larry Schwartz, Steve Capper, Mark Gravitch and Jeffrey Noel were the Waldos, who coined the term 420, now part of global cannabis culture.
Photo: Santiago Mejia / The Chronicle

It was a private signal that became a worldwide symbol.

In 1971, five teenage boys at San Rafael High School created a code, 420, for the time to meet after school, get high and search for a plot of illegal marijuana planted by a member of the Coast Guard, whose map to the grow and permission to harvest it had found its way to them.

The code was a way for the boys, who nicknamed themselves the Waldos after a wall where they sat cracking jokes between classes, to talk about cannabis without adults knowing what they were up to. They whispered, “420 Louis” to each other in the halls, and met at the statue of Louis Pasteur in front of the school.

Their quest for the pot patch ended without success, but the code took on a life of its own and — thanks to the teens, their friends and even the Grateful Dead — spread around the globe in the decades after.

Do you know what 420 means?

The inventors of 420 explain where the term came from
Video: SFChronicle

As the legal use of medicinal and recreational marijuana rises across the U.S., cannabis fans’ need for secrecy is fading. But the 420 code lives on, as much a symbol of the pot world as a marijuana leaf is. On this day, April 20, what started as a private joke has turned into an international day of pot celebration — with the Waldos, now men in their 60s, evolving into unwitting but integral players in cannabis legend. Last year, 420 was even listed in the Oxford English Dictionary, which cited the Waldos as the term's originators.

"We didn't come out with April 20 as a high holy holiday. That wasn't our intention," said Mark Gravitch, 61, of San Rafael, a school and yearbook photographer. "The phenomenon is unbelievable."

"We had hundreds of words and slangs," said Steve Capper, 63, a financial services company owner from San Anselmo. "420 was just the tip of Waldo culture."

For decades, with marijuana illegal, the Waldos kept a low profile. Now that the commercial sale of cannabis is legal in California, they're opening up about the roots of the term.

In several interviews in recent weeks — and their first with The Chronicle — the Waldos said they were not stereotypical stoners flopped on a couch. They were jocks, filmmakers and math nerds who liked to smoke weed to spur laughter and creativity.

SAN RAFAEL HIGH SCHOOL
4

1 of 4

Jeffrey Noel (left), Mark Gravitch, Dave Reddix, Larry Schwartz and Steve Capper at San Rafael High School, where in the early 1970s they were the Waldos and coined the term 420, now part of global cannabis culture.

Photo: Santiago Mejia / The Chronicle

Some 47 years later, they remain friends. They live in the North Bay, have wives and kids and still use cannabis, at least occasionally. All said they voted for Prop. 64, the 2016 ballot proposition that made it legal to use recreational cannabis.

"When we were young, I said there was no way we would ever see legalization of pot in our lifetime," said Larry Schwartz, 61, of Petaluma, an account manager at a printing company. "I'm shocked that it happened, and happy it did."

Jeff Noel, 63, of Santa Rosa, a salesman at Chateau St. Jean winery, said the primary reason he and the other Waldos needed a code was that his father was a state narcotics agent. In the days of landlines with cords plugged into the wall, it was hard to hide phone calls from parents.

"I clearly remember my dad hearing me say '420,'" Noel said. "He said, 'I know you're up to something — I'll figure this out.' He was trying to do mathematical breakdowns to letters, like a World War II code."

(His father died in 1978 without knowing, suffering a fatal heart attack after chasing a suspect.)

To back up their claims, the Waldos have evidence, stored in a safe deposit box in a vault at a Wells Fargo Bank branch in San Francisco. They're irked by false claims on the Internet, including theories that 420 was police code for marijuana (it's not) or has something to do with Adolf Hitler's birthday (it doesn't).

A Waldos 420 flag from 1972 made by a classmate of the Waldos' at San Rafael High School, at a bank vault in San Francisco.
Photo: Eric Risberg / Associated Press

“We’re the only ones in the world who have proof that no one predates our use of this term,” said Dave Reddix, 63, of Greenbrae, a former CNN cameraman.

To see the proof in the subterranean vault required a visitor to meet a notary public at the bank, show a driver’s license and sign an affidavit. Two Waldos who arranged the show-and-tell were asked to submit to fingerprinting to access the box.

The evidence includes a half-dozen letters written by the Waldos to one another and to friends in college. The letters bear postmarks from the 1970s and references to 420 in the text and on the envelopes.

Reddix wrote in a Sept. 23, 1975, letter to Capper, then at San Diego State University: “My brother is Phil Lesh’s manager and last weekend I had a job as a doorman backstage at a concert. I smoked out with Crosby and Phil Lesh and got paid $20. I was laid off a few weeks ago and am collecting unemployment or funenjoyment. P.S. A little 420 for your weekend.”

The 420 was a reference to a joint that Reddix had enclosed inside the envelope. It arrived intact, Capper said.

There’s a batik print with a 420 logo, made in art class by a high school chum. And there’s a certified 167-page military record from the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis showing that the pot-farming Coast Guard veteran, Gary Phillip Newman, was indeed stationed at the Point Reyes Lighthouse in 1971.

Photos from the early 1970s showing the Waldos are stored in their bank vault in San Francisco. The friends from San Rafael High School, now in their 60s, are credited with coining the term 420, which became a worldwide symbol of cannabis culture.
Photo: Eric Risberg / Associated Press
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Newman, while enlisted, had planted a cannabis patch on federal land and grown nervous. As the harvest approached, he drew a crude map of the location and gave it to his brother-in-law, who in turn gave it to Capper.

Tracking Newman down decades later wasn’t easy. He’d gotten divorced and faded from sight. Capper began searching in 2010. He looked in phone books, sought military records and made cold calls, to no avail. As public attitudes toward marijuana began to soften, Capper received a tip that eventually led the Waldos — and a detective they’d hired — to the veteran in 2016. Newman was homeless, living under a bridge in San Jose.

In a video with the Waldos shot at the Point Reyes Lighthouse, Newman affirms he had planted the patch and drawn the map that led to the 420 treasure hunt in 1971. (The video is posted on www.420waldos.com.)

Also in the vault was evidence that the Oxford English Dictionary found critical in its decision to include 420 in the dictionary last year. It's the first published evidence of the use of 420 — an edition of the San Rafael High student paper, the Red & White, from 1974. A "Question Man" feature asked students, "If you had the opportunity to say anything in front of the graduating class, what would you say?" and quoted one shaggy-haired youth as saying, "4:20."

The Waldos' 420 tales and other teenage exploits — including jaunts to San Francisco International Airport, where they said they sprinted underneath jets taking off on the runways — are detailed on their website, in part to keep the memories alive.

The mythology also serves another purpose, one they have not yet fully explored: branding.

They've lent their name to a springtime beer, the Waldos' Special Ale, made by Lagunitas Brewing Co., but do not profit from it. They've been approached by two separate Hollywood studios but have turned film offers down. The emerging cannabis industry offers new possibilities. On April 20, in a collaboration with Chemistry, a vape pen cartridge company in Oakland, the Waldos are co-branding a $50 vape pen called 1971: A Vintage Cannabis Experience. Net proceeds will go to the nonprofit Drug Policy Alliance, a cannabis law reform group.

From there, who knows?

"We keep it light," Capper said. "The trajectory 420 has had — it was amusing to watch it unfold."

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Carolyne Zinko

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Carolyne Zinko, a native of Wisconsin, joined The San Francisco Chronicle in 1993 as a news reporter covering Peninsula crime, city government and political races. She worked as the paper's society columnist from 2000 to 2004, when she wrote about the lifestyles of the rich but not necessarily famous. Since then, she has worked for the Sunday Style and Datebook sections, covering gala night openings and writing trend pieces. Her profiles of personalities have included fashion designer Diane von Furstenberg, Twitter co-founder Biz Stone and Emanuel Ungaro fashion house owner Asim Abdullah, to name a few. In a six-month project with The Chronicle's investigative team, she recently revealed the misleading practices of a San Francisco fashion charity that took donations from wealthy philanthropists but donated little to the stated cause of helping the developmentally disabled. On the lifestyle front, her duties also including writing about cannabis culture for The Chronicle and its cannabis website, www.GreenState.com website.

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