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Coronavirus sends 420 gatherings up in smoke, but potheads still plan virtual toke

Cities have banned outdoor 420 celebrations, driving the festivities online.

By **Bill Hutchinson**

April 20, 2020, 2:18 AM • 17 min read

LATHER YOUR HANDS BY RUBBING THEM TOGETHER WITH THE SOAP.
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Why is 420 the unofficial marijuana holiday?

Handwashing is a great way to protect you and your family from getting sick.

At the age of 81 and having survived a bout with prostate cancer, marijuana icon Tommy Chong meets the definition of someone the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention considers "vulnerable" to the coronavirus.

But when contacted by ABC News, Chong, who has been adhering to stay-at-home orders at his Southern California residence, said he doesn't plan to let the virus, also known as COVID-19, get in the way of celebrating one of the most synchronistic dates the pot world has ever anticipated: 4/20/2020.

"I know everybody calls me because of my age, asking, 'How are you feeling?'" Chong said in a phone interview. "I'm doing great, man. I don't know if it's my health or the pot, or it may be both."

But at 4:20 p.m. on Monday, the normally huge crowds passing bongs and joints will be absent from such famous weed-smoking destinations as Civic Center Park in Denver, RFK Stadium in Washington, D.C., and "Hippie Hill" in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park.

A marijuana user smokes joint at a 420 Day celebration on "Hippie Hill" in Golden Gate Park, April 20, 2010, in San Francisco.

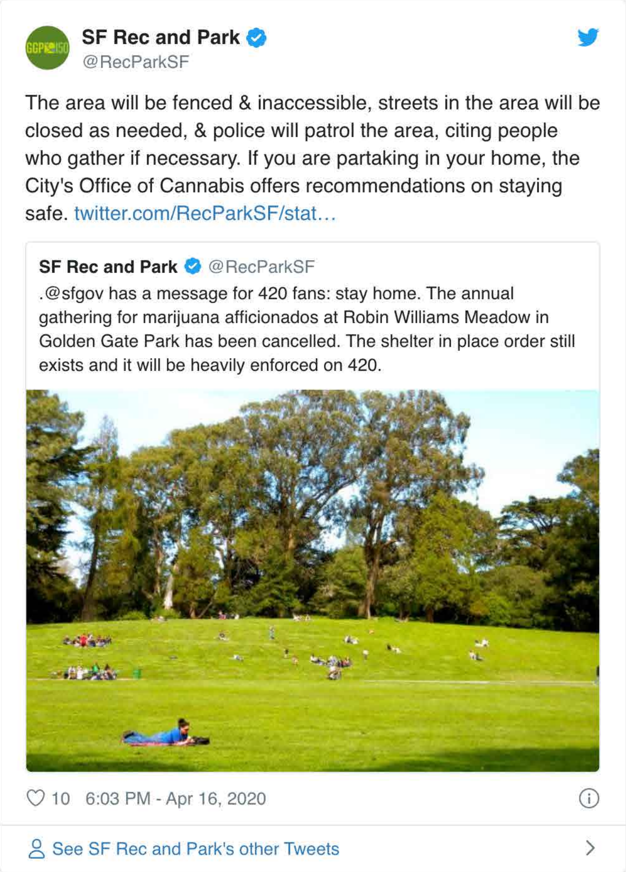
Justin Sullivan/Getty Images

"We will not tolerate anybody coming to San Francisco for 4/20," San Francisco Mayor London Breed warned last week. "It is not safe to gather in larger groups of people, in Golden Gate Park or anywhere else."

To make sure no one sneaks on to Hippie Hill, the city Recreation & Parks Department has erected a fence around the grassy area where an estimated

15,000 people gathered at last year's annual toke-fest.

Like many cannabis connoisseurs, Chong, who along with his comedic sidekick Cheech Marin rose to pot prominence with a series of "Cheech and Chong" movies in the 1980s, will be taking his activities online this year.



SF Rec and Park
@RecParkSF

The area will be fenced & inaccessible, streets in the area will be closed as needed, & police will patrol the area, citing people who gather if necessary. If you are partaking in your home, the City's Office of Cannabis offers recommendations on staying safe. twitter.com/RecParkSF/stat…

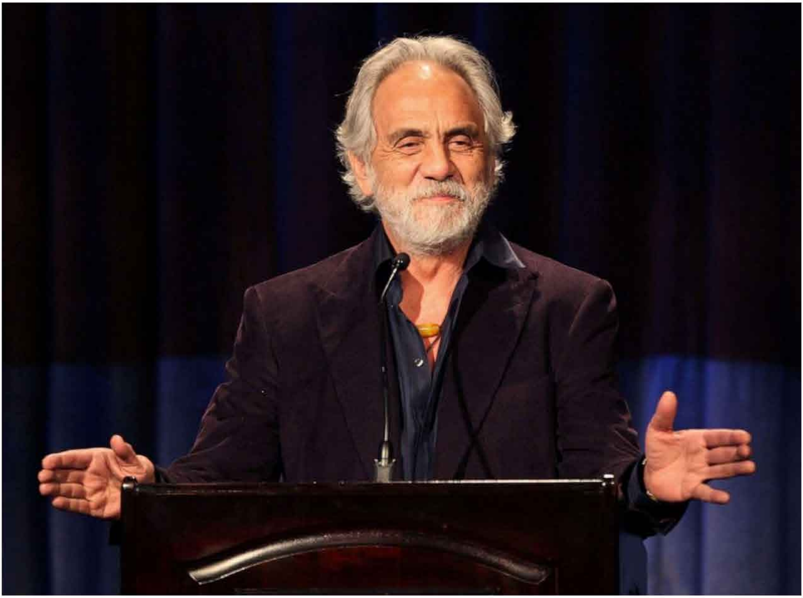
SF Rec and Park @RecParkSF
.@sfgov has a message for 420 fans: stay home. The annual gathering for marijuana afficionados at Robin Williams Meadow in Golden Gate Park has been cancelled. The shelter in place order still exists and it will be heavily enforced on 420.

“We’ve got a new 'Cheech and Chong' game app. It’s funny how it's coming out right at the right time. It’s a game app called ‘Cheech and Chong’s Bud

Farm,'" Chong said. "It's a game that you can play indoors while you're under quarantine. It's perfect."

Other than helping to launch the app, Chong said he doesn't plan on doing much more than he has been doing while under stay-at-home orders.

"You know, waking up and moseying downstairs for breakfast, and then finding a place to have a nap," Chong said. "Then waiting for 420. That's traditionally when I get on my app or Instagram and I smoke up with my fans."



Tommy Chong at a gala at the Beverly Hilton Hotel, on Feb. 9, 2009, in Beverly Hills, Calif.
Frederick M. Brown/Getty Images

Asked if he could share any insight on the pandemic, Chong said, "It's a time out for the human race."

"I think, nature, especially Mother Nature, said, ‘OK, enough. You ain’t listening to me, you keep polluting and so we’re just gonna give you a little something to keep you busy for a while. You’re not going to burn any fossil fuel, you’re not going to make any more plastic garbage and you’re going to sit in your house till you learn the lesson. And if you don’t learn the lesson then we’re just gonna keep doing this until you do,'" Chong said.

Where are the Waldos?

If scientist weren't so busy looking to cure the coronavirus, they might do contact tracing to find the origins of the 420 expression and how it grew into a worldwide phenomenon.

In 1971, five buddies at San Rafael High School in Northern California coined the term 420 long before it was designated a special day on the calendar. Now middle-aged and in professions ranging from independent filmmaker to wine salesman, Larry Schwartz, Steve Capper, Jeff Noel, Mark Gravitch and Dave Reddix still refer to each other as the "Waldos," a name taken from a low wall on their high school campus where they would meet at 4:20 p.m. after school every day to smoke weed next to a statue of famed French microbiologist and chemist Louis Pasteur, who, coincidentally, is renowned for his discoveries of the principles of vaccination, microbial fermentation and pasteurization.

For the first time in years, the Waldos will not be physically together to celebrate on Monday, they told ABC News during a conference call from their various lockdown sites.

"I was talking to a guy on the phone the other day, and he said he was a 'stay-at-home dad.' And I said, 'Well, we’re all 'stay-at-home' now. I’m a stay-at-home Waldo," said Capper.

"It's hard because the Waldos like to go on safaris, you know," added Reddix. "We can’t have our safaris. It’s tough being locked up."

It was one of their first "safaris" that became the catalyst for the 420 term, they said. Caper said a pal handed him a map to a marijuana patch being grown by a group of Coast Guardsmen in Point Reyes, Marin County, who wanted to get rid of it before their commanding officer busted them. The Waldos gladly took the map and made plans to meet at the school's Louie Pasteur statue when all their school activities were over at 4:20 p.m.

But the location of the secret patch proved elusive, so the treasure hunt continued. And as the weeks went by, they would remind each other in the school hallways to meet after school at the designated time.

The Waldos, from left, Mark Gravitch, Larry Schwartz, Dave Reddix, Jeffrey Noel and Steve Capper sit on a wall they used to frequent at San Rafael High School in San... **more**

Eric Risberg/AP

"We'd pass each other and go '4:20 Louie?'" recalled Reddix. "After about the fourth week of looking for the weed patch, we dropped the 'Louie' and we would just look at each other and go '4:20.'"

Noel said 420 became a code that allowed them to keep their then-illegal activities from adults, particularly his father, who was a state narcotics agent.

"Back in the days of phones with cords, I was standing in the kitchen and he’s at one end of the room and I’m at the other talking to a bunch of the Waldos and we used the term 420 in the conversation," Noel recalled. "My dad tried to figure it out. He said, ‘I know you’re talking about something. I don’t know exactly what it is.' He tried the whole military formula of using letters for numbers and such to break it down.

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"At the time, remember, it was still illegal," Noel said of marijuana, which didn't become legal for recreational sales and adult consumption in California until Jan. 1, 2018. "It was a felony where you could get thrown in jail for an extended amount of time for having a joint."

From there, Reddix said the term spread to the band the Grateful Dead. He said his brother, Patrick Reddix, who he says died from cancer in 2018 at 4:20 p.m., was a good friend of Grateful Dead band member Phil Lesh and managed a side band Lesh started while on hiatus from the Dead in 1975. Reddix said his brother hired him to be a roadie for Lesh's band.

"I was backstage with guys like David Crosby and Phil Lesh and Terry Haggerty [the so-called father of fusion guitar], and all these musicians that would come by and jam with them," Reddix, now 65, recalled. “I was smoking with them, using the term 420 and somehow it spread throughout the Dead community from that time."

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Capper said that it wasn't until the 1990s that he realized the 420 term had taken on a life of its own, and had been commercialized with bumper stickers, T-shirts and hats. He said that in 1998, he contacted Steve Hager, then the editor of High Times magazine, to inform him the Waldos were the originators of 420.

Skeptical, Hager traveled to California to see the Waldos' evidence, which included a 420 flag one of their friends made in the early 1970s and letters with postmarks from the early 1970s in which they referenced 420. Hager wrote an article that appeared in the December 1998 edition of High Times, solidifying the Waldos as the originators of the 420 term.

"On a lot of different fronts, 420 was certainly the absolute catalyst towards the end of [marijuana] prohibition," Capper said.

While the Waldos won't physically be together for the 420 celebration, they will toke up virtually and appear together on a number of online programs. Capper said this year's celebration is more special than ever.

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"First, they shut down all the [cannabis] dispensaries, like really quick, and then they immediately opened them, in most states [where recreation cannabis is legal]," Capper said. "They opened them back up as essential services. So that’s something to really celebrate this year. Not only is it legal, it’s essential."

The end of sharing a bong

Steve DeAngelo, the so-called "God Father of the Legal Cannabis Industry," agreed with Capper that this year's 420 celebration is one to salute.

"I don’t know if folks who haven’t been around as long as I have can really appreciate the magnitude of this, but as late as 2016 I was still fighting, spending millions of dollars going to court week in and week out trying to keep the federal government from seizing the property that we were operating in," DeAngelo, chairman emeritus of Harborside cannabis dispensaries in California, told ABC News. "And now have the six Bay Area governments, and then followed by the state government of California, declare cannabis to be an essential product, such that when other businesses are required to close, cannabis is actually required to stay open."

He said that normally on 420, Harborside's dispensaries would offer special deals and have entertainment in the parking lots of its shops.

Steve DeAngelo, Chairman Emeritus at Harborside Heath Center speaks during the opening keynote at the California Cannabis Business Conference in Anaheim, Calif., Oct. 23, 2018.

Medianews Group/orange County Re/MediaNews Group via Getty Images

"This year, it's the opposite," DeAngelo said. "We really don't want people to crowd the stores on 420. So we're not having any kind of special anything that's limited to that day."

DeAngelo, 61, who co-founded Harborside Health Center in 2006 as one of California's first cannabis dispensaries after state voters legalized medical marijuana in 1996, said that this year's celebration is also a time to lament some of the traditions of pot-smoking he believes will fade away in the wake of coronavirus, like sharing a bong or a joint.

"I think that you're going to see a variety of changes with inhaled forms of cannabis," he said. "Anything that involves sharing a device or a joint, I think is something that people are going to be looking at very, very carefully for quite a long while."

Looking on the bright side of things, DeAngelo, whose birth certificate indicates he was born at 4:20 p.m., said that while he'll miss being close to like-minded people smoking out, he'll make a lot more personal appearances at celebration events virtually.

"Usually I have to choose between one or two places to be on 420. This year I get to go to a dozen different 420 parties," DeAngelo said. "I'll be at Willie

Nelson's Luck Reunion gathering. I will be at the Great American Smoke Sash gathering. I will be at the Chronic Relief gathering. I'll be hosting a Reddit AMA (Ask Me Anything). I will be doing something with a platform called Miss Grass. I'll be doing a podcast with Happy Monkey and there's probably a couple of others in there."

'This will be a very different 420'

In mid-March, as cities across the country began to impose stay-at-home orders, cannabis dispensaries saw a sharp spike in business. Figures from the nationwide cannabis data intelligence firm Headset showed that legal marijuana sales in California skyrocketed 159% on March 16 compared with the same day in 2019. In Washington state, sales jumped 33% on March 15 compared with a week earlier, with purchases of more than $50 increasing from 16% to 21%.

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Sales leveled off before they spiked again nearly 50% last week as American taxpayers began receiving financial stimulus checks of up to $1,200 from the federal government, according to Jane Technologies, an eCommerce platform for more than 1,300 cannabis retailers across the nation.

Some members of the legal cannabis industry have joined forces to give back to their communities on 420.

FILE PHOTO: Marijuana smoke rises from a smoking crowd, April 20, 2010, at a pro-pot "4/20" celebration in front of the state capitol building in Denver. April 20th has... **more**

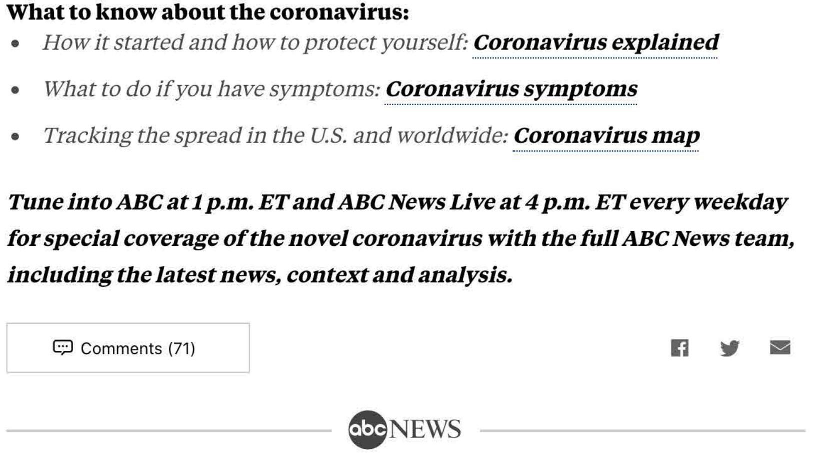
John Moore/Getty Images

In Colorado, Friends in Weed, a consortium of cannabis businesses, has issued a challenge dubbed 420Help that began over the weekend to raise money for Gov. Jared Polis' COVID Relief Fund, which is providing financial assistance to Coloradans impacted by the coronavirus.

The organizers of the event are challenging cannabis businesses and coalitions to donate at least $420 or 4.2% of sales to Polis' funds and for consumers to give $4.20 to the fund. Organizers are also encouraging people to support their favorite dispensary's "budtenders" by providing them gift cards to local restaurants and small businesses.

Raven Guillmette, who manages the Higher Grade medical marijuana dispensary in Denver, said her store was among those to contribute to the fund.

"This will be a very different 420, I'd say, for everyone in the country. We're just treating it like a regular day this year. Usually, everybody gets dressed up, we'll go out that night to a concert, maybe do some kind of joint giveaways. But not this year," Guillmette told ABC News. "That's why I think the challenge is a nice idea to do for the entire community. It's just nice to see we're helping local businesses and they're willing to help us."



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