

Fifty Years of 420 and The Waldos: Time Flies When You're Having Fun

An exclusive with the legendary Waldos—the creators of 420.

HT BY MAUREEN MEEHAN · APRIL 20, 2021



Image from The Waldos' website and Twitter account

Fifty years ago, five high school friends at Marin County's San Rafael High School heard about a secret grow patch of marijuana that had been planted by a member of the U.S. Coast Guard on Point Reyes Peninsula and then abandoned. The Coast Guardsman's brother gave the boys a map to help them find the treasure, and the search was on.

The students, who adopted the name "Waldos" because they gathered near a wall on school grounds, began **meeting at 4:20** to then go off and search for the abandoned cannabis patch.

"Of course we never found it!" Steve Capper, 66, told *High Times* with a laugh. "But we had fun searching."



Their secret code was initially "420 Louie" because they met at a statue of the French chemist, Louis Pasteur on campus. It was later shortened to 420 which became the Waldo's private joke, effectively avoiding forces of drug suppression, and eventually becoming arguably the most important term in the lexicon of American weed culture.

The group of five Waldos, still close friends today, enjoyed their stoned afternoons in the scenic mountains, redwood forests, rivers and streams of Marin County, just north of San Francisco. They filled their time with what they call their "shtick, jokes and humorous skits."

"We'd start off at the school and then go to 'less bustable places' in the mountains. We were, and still are, comedic desperados," joined in Waldo Dave Reddix. "We had a blast making jokes about everything and mostly cracking each other up."



Back in 1971, when the Waldos were in high school, California was at the epicenter of a cultural explosion with rock-n-roll, marijuana, and anti-war protests happening simultaneously. With time, 420 would burst onto the scene, somewhat unbeknownst to the Waldos, for whom the phrase was simply part of their mischievous high school pastimes and just one of many other **catchphrases** they co-created.

Little did they know that their youthful antics and escapades would spawn not only a national movement, but eventually a full-fledged cannabis holiday.

When Reddix, now 66, landed a roadie gig in the early 70s with **Grateful Dead** bass player Phil Lesh, a close friend of his older brother Patrick, he saw that the band and its followers were doing their part in spreading 420's popularity.

"But still, it's really amazing that what started out as a secret code amongst ourselves spread around the world," Reddix said.

Even more amazing is the fact that the Waldos were diligent enough to have never gotten busted. And it's not like they didn't come close.

"We had to be super careful at all times. In the 70s, marijuana possession was a serious crime," said Reddix, who recently retired from years as a network TV producer and cameraman. "And to make it worse, Jeff's Noel's [one of the Waldos] father was a high-ranking member of the Bureau of Narcotics Enforcement for the State of California!"

The Waldos' Legacy, Just Twenty Years Later...

After a couple of decades had passed and the Waldos finished high school and college, got jobs, got married, and had kids, they realized how deeply their 420 code word had seeped into the collective consciousness of the cannabis subculture...and beyond.

"It's already like 1995, and I'm seeing that there's a **Dead Head 420 draft beer**, all these 420 hats and T-shirts at head shops in San Diego's Mission Beach, and we hear that people are chanting '420' at huge gatherings at the University of Colorado," Capper said. "And when we saw that a bunch of the clocks in [Quentin Tarantino's] *Pulp Fiction* are set at 4:20, we knew something was going on!"

What to do?

Enter High Times

In 1998, Capper decided to contact then-*High Times* editor Steve Hager and inform him that they, the Waldos, are the "true originators, the founding fathers of 420" and could easily prove it if necessary, with multiple pieces of hard physical evidence.

"Hager told me that we needed to put up a website immediately, which we did. It was kind of funny with lots of self-deprecating humor," Capper said. "But then our next and **current website**, while still lots of fun, also contains interesting history and stories about what was going on during those years and where we're at today."

Their website also happens to showcase an awesome **420 watch** with a Visible247 illumination system that relies on any available light sources. A percentage of profits from the 420 Watch sales will go to organizations like Drug Policy Alliance and NORML.

The other three Waldos are Jeff Noel, who works in the wine industry; Larry Schwartz, who does printing and graphics; and Mark Gravich, who works in commercial photography. Some of them have been friends since elementary school and they all still live within miles of each other in Marin and Sonoma Counties. All of them are now in their sixties, and they communicate daily and frequently get together for adventures.

"We're as close as brothers if not closer," said Capper who specializes in commercial business lending. "We're constantly in touch and never miss each other's important milestones. Our wives accept our relationship and our children have always been accepting of the extended Waldo family."

And There's Beer!

Lagunitas is brewing **The Waldos' Special Ale**, which is branded as the "dankest and hoppiest ever brewed with the help of the Waldos in honor of 420."



Left to right: Mark Gravich; Jeff Noel; Steve Capper (with vape pen); Dave Reddix (holding 1971 rolling papers); Larry Schwartz/ Image courtesy of The Waldos

What is 420 to the Waldos Today?

It's still about weed, enjoying it and not getting arrested for doing so.

"But 420 is mostly about friendship, family, solidarity and love," both Capper and Reddix agree and speak for the Brotherhood of the Waldos.

Happy 420!