

The Way It Was Supposed to Be

For the California medical marijuana movement, this was its siege at Wounded Knee. Early in the morning of September 5, 2002, dozens of Drug Enforcement Administration agents, camouflaged and heavily armed, surged into the Santa Cruz Mountains. Their black-windowed four-wheel-drive vehicles, followed by a U-Haul truck, rumbled into the forest and up a winding road, climbing to a crescent-shaped ridge shrouded by coastal redwoods and eucalyptus. Beneath the ridge was a terraced marijuana garden—a medicinal and spiritual refuge for the sick and dying.

Mike Corral, cofounder and supervising gardener for the Wo/Men's Alliance for Medical Marijuana, had just arisen. He heard the vehicles lurch to a stop at 6:45 outside his board-and-batten cottage, which had a grooved fiberglass roof and a solar heat collector. Corral had stayed there while his wife, Valerie Corral, and two female friends had gone to a James Joyce reading in Santa Cruz by local author and philosopher Robert Anton Wilson. The women were in the upper house on the property, a rustic, angular lodge perpetually under construction. They had gone to bed after sitting up until 3 A.M. wrestling with ideas for a hospice care program for terminally ill friends who used marijuana to quiet the searing pains from cancer or AIDS as they readied for their final journeys.

Mike Corral looked out a window to the clearing between his cottage and the WAMM garden, a flowering orchard of 167 marijuana plants, arranged with paths for wheelchairs and a welcoming sign: Love Grows Here. He saw agents bolting out with automatic weapons and then scurrying to assemble a battering ram. Corral ran to leash his Belgian sheepdog, Ebo, fearing they might shoot the dog if it were loose. He grabbed his cell phone, dialing the first five digits of Valerie's number before the officers burst inside.

“Where are you?” they yelled.

They headed toward the stairs, their assault rifles leading the way. Corral moved toward the top of the staircase.

“I’m not violent. This is medical marijuana,” he hollered. “I’ve got a phone in my hand. I’m not going to resist.”

Shirtless and wearing a pair of sweat pants, he started down the stairs and was hit immediately with blinding floodlights. Agents grabbed him, forced him facedown at the base of the stairs, and cuffed him. Corral saw a rifle barrel inches from his left eye—and sensed another half dozen weapons trained on him.

“Where’s Valerie?” the agents demanded.

The DEA task force was being led by agent Patrick Kelly, a thirty-one-year-old former U.S. Marine Corps captain fresh from an assignment as an air marshal after the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. On loan from the DEA, Kelly had guarded flights in and out of Washington, D.C., and the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City from would-be international terrorists. Now he was working for Group 2—the marijuana unit—in the DEA’s San Francisco office. He was soon to become California supervisor of the DEA’s Domestic Cannabis Eradication/Suppression Program, charged with targeting major drug traffickers and destroying illicit gardens of sometimes tens of thousands of plants. But Kelly didn’t know that he was about to carry out the smallest raid, in plant number, of his career, or that it would trigger a backlash for the DEA for destroying a garden that alleviated the suffering of severely and terminally ill people. He didn’t fathom the political flak the agency would take for unknowingly sending armed agents to the bed of a polio patient or for arresting a husband/caregiver, Mike Corral, and his wife, Valerie, an accident victim whom the marijuana movement and the media would cast as the Mother Teresa of medicinal cannabis.

Years earlier, Valerie had suffered head trauma in a bizarre car crash, in which a low-flying World War II-era P-51 Mustang training in the Nevada desert for an air show caused a Volkswagen Beetle she was riding in to tumble off a highway. The 1973 accident left Valerie with often uncontrollable grand mal seizures, triggering confusion, loss of muscle control, convulsions, and fainting. Mike, who married Valerie in 1978, would sometimes notice her eyes go blank in midconversation. She would touch the right side of her injured skull. Her body would shake. He would wrap his arms around her to keep her from wildly flailing or grab her before she hit the floor. A couple of

times the seizures struck when they were at a restaurant. He scooped her up and carried her out.

Valerie had been a premed student at the time of her accident, but then she became a prisoner of the seizures and the multitude of prescription medicines meant to combat them. The drugs left her feeling listless, as if she were “living under water,” she would say. Mike Corral, a son of an IBM computer technician, had quit a tech job to become a nature photographer and then started reading up on marijuana. Drawn to a medical journal article on cannabis treating seizures in rats, he urged Valerie to try marijuana. In 1986, eight years after they were married, the couple moved to the wooded sanctuary north of Santa Cruz and Mike started growing a few plants on the property. Over time, pot reduced the intensity of Valerie’s seizures—so much so that Mike soon took to leaving prerolled joints in every room of the house. He lit one and brought it to her mouth each time she got the “aura,” that blank, fearful look signaling an attack coming on. Ultimately, marijuana succeeded in nearly quashing Valerie’s seizures altogether, weaned her from prescription meds, and gave her back her life.

In 1993, local authorities raided the Corral’s five-plant garden, stirring protests from marijuana advocates. Mike Corral accepted drug treatment in lieu of prosecution for pot cultivation, only to aggravate his counselors by bringing in articles on the healing benefits of marijuana. Valerie filed California’s first-known medical necessity defense for marijuana. With her case set for trial, the Santa Cruz County district attorney abruptly dismissed charges against her. The same year, Mike and Valerie founded the Wo/Men’s Alliance for Medical Marijuana. The Santa Cruz refuge for medicinal cultivation quickly drew in the sickest of the sick.

Area oncologists gently suggested to patients who couldn’t stomach their chemotherapy that they get in touch with WAMM. The group attracted people seeking pain relief, therapy, and fellowship in the final stages of life. Valerie Corral emerged as a nurturing caregiver and a meticulous administrator for a marijuana-growing collective that parceled out its harvest, sharing the medicine at weekly Tuesday night meetings at a rented hall in downtown Santa Cruz. Up in the mountains, Mike Corral oversaw the communal garden. He directed WAMM volunteers—patients growing their own medicine—in raising seedlings in greenhouses before the first full moon in spring, putting the plants into the ground before the summer solstice, and usually harvesting by the first full moon in fall.

The crop was a few weeks from harvest on September 5, 2002, when the DEA team moved from the lower house, where Mike Corral was handcuffed,

to the guest room adjoining the upper house, where they roused a sleeping Suzanne Pfeil.

“Get up!” the officers barked.

Trained for armed and dangerous drug criminals, they didn’t realize this suspect was a woman with a leg badly shriveled from childhood polio who used a motorized wheelchair or moved tepidly with leg braces and crutches.

“Get up!”

Pfeil fumbled to remove the respirator that helped her weakened lungs function while she slept. She tried to explain she couldn’t rise. She gestured toward the crutches and braces at the bedside, seized by a sudden fear the agents might mistake them for weapons.

“Get up!”

The officers pulled back the covers, revealing her atrophied leg. Pfeil managed to sit up enough for them to handcuff her from behind. They left her in bed with a couple of officers standing guard.

“Stay here!” one of the departing agents said as they moved in formation back out to the deck and into the house. Pfeil, a Santa Cruz watercolor artist who used marijuana to ease pain from muscle failure and damage to her nervous system, wondered where exactly they thought she might go.

The morning raid was happening a decade after 77 percent of voters in liberal Santa Cruz County passed a local initiative endorsing the use of marijuana for medical conditions. It was nearly six years after California voters approved Proposition 215, the Compassionate Use Act for Medical Marijuana. In 1996, Californians made their state the first in America to legalize marijuana as medicine in a vote driven by sympathetic images of cancer patients quelling nausea with cannabis, and AIDS sufferers keeping themselves from wasting away by boosting their appetites with weed.

Proposition 215, allowing physicians to recommend marijuana “in the treatment of cancer, anorexia, AIDS, chronic pain, spasticity, glaucoma, arthritis, migraine or *any other illness for which marijuana provides relief,*” would eventually give birth to an unbridled medical marijuana market. By the late 2000s, purportedly nonprofit patient “collectives” sprouted wildly in California cities and counties as retail-style medical pot stores. They raked in millions of dollars in marijuana transactions with people declaring a medical need for relief from anything from restless legs syndrome to psoriasis, sleep apnea to menopause, social anxiety to diarrhea. By early 2010, the State Board of Equalization taxation agency estimated medical marijuana dispensaries—patient networks accepting “reimbursement” for the costs of canna-

bis cultivation—were annually producing up to \$1.3 billion in over-the-counter transactions and more than \$100 million in state sales taxes. A burgeoning support industry of pot doctors, hydroponics supply stores, lawyers, property managers, and public relations specialists cashed in on the boom.

And yet, in its patient-run garden in the mountains and its modest office and lounge at a downtown Santa Cruz warehouse, there was WAMM. Mike Corral liked to say the pot-growing community of some 200 to 250 patient-members at any given time lived on as a “socialist organization trying to exist in a capitalist world.” It was more. Founded three years before Proposition 215, WAMM, with its members battling symptoms that were anything but benign, shared the crop based on medical need. Most members got their medicine for free. Others paid a fraction of what medical marijuana consumers doled out for designer weed brands at bustling dispensaries in California’s urban centers. The Wo/Men’s Alliance for Medical Marijuana, with a couple of office workers, modest salaries for Mike and Valerie, and a legion of patient volunteers, operated perpetually on the verge of insolvency.

People such as Harry Wain, a former Lockheed engineer with terminal pancreatic cancer, came to WAMM for companionship. He had never tried marijuana. After a while, he told Valerie Corral that the pot the community gave him “opened a portal to accept death, to engage the unknown.” He summoned her to his bedside in his final days. “Come sit with me in the exquisiteness of this moment,” he would say. “You can feel it. Exquisite. Isn’t it?” Harold Allen, a tattoo-sporting construction contractor with a roaring Harley became one of WAMM’s first members. He turned to Valerie as he surrendered to cancer and HIV-related illnesses. “Humor me, I’m dying,” he said.

Maria Lucinda “Lucy” Garcia, a Santa Cruz hairdresser and makeup artist, endured her ovarian cancer through the company of members of WAMM. She long hid her marijuana use from her teenage daughter, unable to admit pot kept her upbeat and functional. Lucy was an animated presence in the garden. She packed lunches, relaxed by making collages out of gum wrappers, and boosted the spirits of fellow members with constant banter. When she began to lose her grasp on life, WAMM members such as Dianne Dias, a breast cancer patient and former nurse, administered morphine and puffed on joints, blowing smoke over Lucy’s bed. When Lucy died, Valerie Corral dressed her in a long red gown for her funeral and did her hair and nails. Corral later adopted Lucy’s daughter, Shana Conte Garcia. Over nearly

eighteen years, more than 220 WAMM members succumbed to their illnesses, with others to follow. Many had their ashes scattered on the hillside above the garden, their lives and resting places commemorated by painted stones and Buddha figurines.

On the night before the DEA raid, Corral and Pfeil sat up sipping coffee and smoking joints while sharing ideas for a WAMM bedside vigil and around-the-clock support system the group would later call its Design for Dying Project. Corral's other houseguest, Alice Smith, a WAMM volunteer who didn't consume marijuana, stuck with coffee as she joined in the brainstorming. Four hours later, Valerie and Alice were awoken by the commotion in Suzanne's room. Valerie slipped out of the master bedroom, walked around a deck, and confronted the agents in the entryway.

"What are you doing in my house? Get out!"

Having just ordered Pfeil to get up, the agents told Valerie to hit the floor. She refused. Valerie sat on a bench, surrounded by hanging plants and more Buddha figures, and demanded to see the search warrant. The agents brought her facedown onto the deck. Pfeil watched from her bed as they cuffed Valerie at gunpoint. Other agents then emerged from the master bedroom, leading out Alice Smith, who was wrapped in a towel. The DEA team walked Valerie and Alice down a path to the lower house, where Mike Corral was being held. Agents loaded Pfeil into an SUV to drive her there.

It was on the walk that Valerie Corral introduced herself to Patrick Kelly. She stridently started in on the operation commander about the Wo/Men's Alliance for Medical Marijuana and its garden that soothed the dying. Kelly was half-listening. He wanted to get her to the lower house to read her her Miranda rights and to interrogate his detainees about marijuana cultivation and the illegal distribution of a prohibited narcotic. To Kelly, he was simply there to enforce Title 21 of the 1970 U.S. Controlled Substances Act. He had a crime scene to process. He was in radio contact with agents in the garden, and with others holding Mike Corral and securing the expansive mountain property.

At the lower house, after agents moved Valerie's handcuffs from behind her back to her front, she offered the officers tea. And every question they asked after Mirandizing her, she deflected by spinning the WAMM narrative. For hours, she talked so passionately about its healing mission to Kelly that the by-the-book DEA agent sensed the strangeness of getting lectured by a woman who came across as some sort of angel of cannabis, as "a true believer" in medical marijuana.

“I want you to remember me,” Valerie told him. “I want you to remember what happens here, that this is a garden that brings peace into people’s lives.”

“I don’t think I’ll remember you,” Kelly answered as he tried to get on with his duties.

But he would. He would also remember Mike Corral’s terraced garden. Kelly had never seen anything like it. The main stems of the marijuana plants were staked down on the ground sideways with wire hooks so that the side branches grew vertically as the plants expanded horizontally. Branches extended up and out through wide-holed netting that supported the heavy limbs bursting with marijuana buds. Single plants, giant bushes more than twelve feet high, filled a hundred square feet of ground each. It would take agents with chainsaws, machetes, and loppers several hours to take them down.

Despite the passage of Proposition 215, marijuana—medical or otherwise—remained a federal crime, with the 1970 Controlled Substances Act declaring that marijuana had no accepted medical use and a high potential for abuse. In the six years after the initiative’s approval, government agents raided cannabis shops serving sick patients in Oakland, Los Angeles, and West Hollywood. Marijuana-growing guru and author Ed Rosenthal spent a day in jail after agents seized plants grown for his Harm Reduction Center, a San Francisco facility serving HIV and hepatitis patients. Authorities raided the San Francisco Cannabis Buyers Club of Dennis Peron, who had coauthored California’s medical marijuana initiative and championed its passage by invoking the name of his lover, Jonathan West, who had died of complications from AIDS. The cases all stirred media attention. Yet it was at the garden of the Wo/Men’s Alliance for Medical Marijuana, in the presence of the living and the dead, that a federal raid would inspire unprecedented compassion and acceptance for medicinal cannabis in California.

The word got out because of Suzanne Pfeil and her hypertension that went into overdrive. As Kelly directed questioning of the detainees at the lower house, Pfeil became light-headed. Her chest was pounding.

“I’m not well,” she told Valerie Corral.

Valerie checked her blood pressure. It was surging. Pfeil was sweaty and pale.

“May I leave?” Pfeil asked the DEA agents. They told her no.

“Well then, you need to call an ambulance. Because if I stroke out, it’s going to be bad news.”

A young agent, one of those who had stormed her bedside, looked at Pfeil with concern. She asked him to get her purse, which contained her blood

pressure pills. She didn't mention that it also had a phone. Pfeil was struck by the agent's apparent compassion as he went to retrieve her bag. She felt sorry for him. When he gets home, she thought, he's going to have to tell somebody he held a gun on a cripple.

Kelly decided getting an ambulance up to the remote property was not an option. He told Alice Smith, by now dressed, she could leave to drive Pfeil to the hospital. Pfeil gulped down three blood pressure pills. Her leg braces strapped on, she rode in the passenger seat as Smith navigated the narrow, pothole-ridden road out of the forest, down the mountain, and into cell phone range. Pfeil, WAMM's vice president, had helped organize the group's emergency "phone tree," developed after the 1993 local raid on Mike and Valerie's garden. The plan was to have WAMM members immediately alert the media if they were raided and call six members each to get a crowd to the site to rally public support.

Her blood pressure medication kicking in, Pfeil started dialing. She called WAMM's lawyers, Santa Cruz attorney Ben Rice and Santa Clara University School of Law professor Gerald Uelemen. She called television stations in San Francisco and Santa Cruz. She called Americans for Safe Access, an Oakland-based advocacy group for medical marijuana patients. She called Dale Gieringer, the California director of the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws and one of the architects of Proposition 215.

"This is an outrage," Gieringer thundered. "This time, they've gone too far. This means war!"

Pfeil then summoned Harold "Hal" Margolin, a seventy-year-old Korean War veteran and a former Santa Cruz clothing manufacturer, to start the WAMM phone tree. "Oh my God, Hal, the DEA is raiding the place!" she told him. They met him at WAMM's offices in downtown Santa Cruz to get out the next round of media calls. Pfeil never made it to the hospital. "She took advantage of my good nature," Kelly would reflect, dryly, years later, on her role in alerting the outside world. "Imagine that."

With the raid under way, Hal Margolin drove up to the mountain property, hoping his presence there could somehow save WAMM as it had saved him. Margolin had been a WAMM member for nearly a decade—since a disastrous spinal surgery left him in such pain that friends told him to seek out the local medical marijuana group. He was dubious about joining. He didn't want to be involved with "a bunch of potheads." But he went to a WAMM meeting. He then showed up for a second one. Just as he was entering the room, he collapsed from a heart attack. Members caught him before

he hit the ground. They put him in a chair, bathed his face with moist towels, and got him to the hospital.

The bespectacled man with a thin white beard was the only member to reach the garden. He saw agents grinding away at the plants with chainsaws. Two armed officers sternly waved Margolin back, ordering him to retreat down the mountains. They glared at him, Margolin thought, as if they were looking at the enemy. Margolin, known around the WAMM commune for his eloquent storytelling, for his ever-wise counsel, began to cry. Years later, in intensive care after a second heart attack, a broken hip, and late-stage leukemia, Margolin recalled that the agents “came with a heavy hand to show us that we were not going to be able to do this. They were teaching us a lesson.” But the pot patients were to deliver one of their own.

Margolin dropped back to the edge of the property as dozens of WAMM members and scores of supporters swarmed to the heavy metal gate at the entrance. That’s when somebody got an idea: they closed the gate and padlocked it, locking the federal agents’ vehicles inside.

By then, the Associated Press and most every major regional newspaper and news station was on the story. Some WAMM members smoked joints, or sobbed, at the gate as supporters directed a torrent of shouts at officers near the entrance. Before television cameras and a press gathering that would turn the raid on the Santa Cruz medical marijuana patients into a national story for days afterward, they refused to allow the government convoy—and its U-Haul of seized pot—to leave. They demanded word on the fate of Mike and Valerie Corral.

Agents on-site told crowd members the couple was still on the property. But Mike and Valerie had already been transported to a federal detention facility in San Jose for arrest and processing.

At the garden, with the remaining DEA vehicles lined up in a convoy preparing to leave, Kelly got word of the clamor at the gate. The task force commander was worried. The last thing he wanted was a confrontation, with people jumping the fence and his agents having to respond. Kelly contacted the Santa Cruz County Sheriff’s Department, which hadn’t been notified about the raid. “We need some marked units up here,” Kelly said, asking the sheriff to clear the crowd from the road. Sheriff Mark Tracy, who had long been a public supporter of WAMM, sent deputies to the entrance. But neither the sheriff nor his officers were eager to add to the media spectacle by dispersing angry pot patients. Instead, sheriff’s officers became a conduit for tense negotiations to end the standoff.

At the San Jose Federal Building, Mike and Valerie were placed in side-by-side walled cells. Mike tapped on the partition to let her know he was okay. She tapped back, signaling she was there. They communicated updates that way as they were alternately brought in and out, photographed, fingerprinted, and booked. Eventually, they heard a rustle of activity outside. Agents came in, removed both from their cells and brought them into an office.

“We’ve got a problem,” one of the DEA officers said. “There are a hundred people at the gate. They’ve got the exits blocked and we can’t leave.”

Mike Corral started to laugh.

The agents asked them to tell the crowd to stand down.

“No, take us there and we’ll diffuse the situation,” Mike said. He was feeling angry now. He wanted to go back, get in the face of the officers who had brought on this raid, put rifles to his head, and upset so many people. But that wasn’t going to happen. The DEA didn’t want to bring Mike and Val to the crowd.

At the gate, Danny Rodrigues, a San Francisco barkeep who had lived with AIDS for nearly three decades, who had survived quadruple-bypass heart surgery, let it be known to sheriff’s deputies that neither he nor the crowd would be going anywhere until Mike and Valerie were free. A sheriff’s officer relayed word to the DEA. Valerie refused agents’ requests to tell Danny to unlock the gate.

By then, the agents in San Jose had processed the couple. They knew they weren’t going to hold them. “We’re going to let you go,” they announced.

“So is this like a hostage exchange?” responded Mike Corral.

“Yeah,” one of the agents said with an anxious laugh. “Please calm things down.”

Valerie agreed to speak with Danny Rodrigues, who had been furnished with a phone by the sheriff’s department. She asked him if the media was there. She could hear people shouting in the background and feel their anger. She feared a confrontation could backfire on WAMM, could diminish public outrage over the federal raid and move the eyes of the media “away from something that was unjust.”

“Danny, tell people to calm down,” she said. “Tell everyone to let them pass—and don’t be rude.”

Rodrigues and another WAMM member took a pair of bolt cutters and cut the chain to the locked gate. At the garden, Kelly got word by radio that the DEA caravan could leave.

“Please let them go,” Rodrigues directed the crowd, his voice raw. “Don’t do anything that would create violence in any manner.”

The DEA vehicles swooped down the mountains, through the gate, and past the jeering crowd. For the moment, it was over.

Twelve days after the raid, with the marijuana crop hacked down and hauled off, WAMM members and supporters massed outside Santa Cruz City Hall, openly smoking pot and distributing a stored stash of medicine the feds had missed. Before still more television cameras, a procession of sick people, including patients in wheelchairs, passed a table, picking up marijuana muffins and cannabis tinctures. One by one, they spoke out, declaring, “I am not a criminal.” Dr. Arnold Leff, a Santa Cruz physician with a beard smothered by his walruslike mustache, took to the microphone. Leff was a former associate director of the White House Office of Drug Abuse Prevention under President Richard Nixon. He had been treating patients suffering from AIDS and HIV since 1985. Dozens of his patients found their way to WAMM. Leff became a mainstay at the organization’s downtown office, treating and counseling the sick until their photos joined the vast wall of tributes honoring the dead. Leff never visited the WAMM garden. He feared that even venturing near it might cause the DEA to come after his medical license. But he stood at city hall, where he angrily spoke to the cameras and publicly decried “an outrageous example of a government without compassion.”

Days later, Valerie and Mike Corral came to the steps of the California capitol building in Sacramento. Valerie looked out over a throng of supporters, welcoming them “to the center of the cyclone” and to a space of reflection on a militaristic raid on sick people cultivating marijuana. “I also want to welcome the DEA agents who may be here,” she said. “I want to welcome the agents behind the masks, the wardens of injustice who carry the guns that point at our heads, who cuff the ill, who steal our medicine. . . . I hope they feel what we feel. I hope they have seen what we have seen, because you can’t be brought to experience the truth without having it touch you, without having it change who you are.”

California’s top law enforcement officer, state attorney general Bill Lockyer, demanded an explanation for the federal raid. In Washington, D.C., DEA administrator Asa Hutchinson answered that the agency had appropriately enforced U.S. law against illegal marijuana cultivation and distribution. “The DEA’s responsibility is to enforce our controlled substances laws, and one of them is marijuana. Someone could stand up and say one of those marijuana plants is designed for someone who is sick, but under federal law, there’s no distinction,” Hutchinson said. But it was a PR disaster. No criminal charges were filed.

WAMM sued federal authorities over the raid. Hal Margolin signed up as one of the plaintiffs. “By God, I had to do it,” he said. The city and county of Santa Cruz joined in the lawsuit. “The DEA was out of its mind. We had wars going on and violent crime and they were raiding people in pain,” declared state senator John Vasconcellos.

Months after the raid, Vasconcellos opened hearings at the capitol to draft a new California law setting rules for the distribution of marijuana for medical purposes. Senate Bill 420—given the numeric nickname for pot—allowed patient-run “collectives” to collect money to cover costs of cultivating and distributing medical marijuana to members. Valerie and Mike Corral testified at the hearings. They thought the legislation, referred to after its passage as the Medical Marijuana Program Act, would help protect patient groups such as WAMM in cultivating marijuana and sharing the medicine. They were naive in thinking that’s what the bill would lead to. With the feds easing off, leery of another misstep, many medical marijuana providers—and speculators—saw Senate Bill 420 as safe cover to accelerate a legal cannabis market.

In 2004, U.S. District judge Jeremy Fogel issued an injunction barring future federal incursions on the WAMM site. For more than a year while the order was in effect, WAMM effectively operated America’s only federally permitted medical marijuana garden. When the order was rescinded in 2005, protesting WAMM members marched or pushed forth in wheelchairs, carrying marijuana plants in a loop along Santa Cruz’s Pacific Avenue to city hall. As the legal fight continued, their mountain garden lay barren for years. Members grew at home or on small plots, still sharing the medicine at the Tuesday meetings. Then, on October, 19, 2009, in the midst of final negotiations to settle the WAMM lawsuit, Attorney General Eric Holder released a statement. He famously declared, “It will not be a priority to use federal resources to prosecute patients with serious illnesses or their caregivers who are complying with state laws on medical marijuana.”

Holder’s message was underscored in a memo the same day by Deputy Attorney General David W. Ogden. The Ogden memo declared the government would go after “illegal drug manufacturing and trafficking” and “commercial enterprises that unlawfully market and sell marijuana for profit”—but not “individuals with cancer or other serious illnesses . . . or those caregivers in clear and unambiguous compliance with existing state law.” The Justice Department contended that the memo’s assurances made moot WAMM’s lawsuit against the DEA and the government. In January 2010,

the Ogden memo was attached to the settlement in the case—in which WAMM reserved its right to refile its suit if it were ever targeted again.

The Ogden memo, which made no mention of “dispensaries” or “marijuana stores,” was widely greeted as a green light for state-permitted medical cannabis commerce. It accelerated the pace of cash registers ringing up transactions in a wild California marijuana market thriving in the name of non-profit compassion. Senate Bill 420, drafted with rules as hazy as pot smoke, enabled an explosion of medical marijuana stores, staffed by well-compensated “bud tenders” and dispensary operators. In Los Angeles, a sudden glut of hundreds of new pot shops advertised special patient “donation” rates for exotically named pot strains—such as Blue Dream or Mango OG or Granddaddy Purple—bred for maximum psychoactive and pleasurable effects. As many as fifteen thousand Californians went to work in an industry that served medical marijuana users with ailments far less profound than the poignant challenges found at WAMM. In the woods of Humboldt and Mendocino Counties on California’s northern coast, long-illicit marijuana growers sought legitimacy as medical cultivators and competed for a share of the legal market. A depressed urban district in Oakland flowered anew as an entrepreneurial medical marijuana center and as the heart of a celebrated political push for cannabis legalization beyond medical use. Proud Oakland officials anointed their city as the Silicon Valley of weed.

As California greeted a migration of people drawn by the Golden State’s medical marijuana acceptance, developments there would create a ripple effect across America, stoking both pot liberalization and cannabis commerce in other states. Medical researchers from the University of California system conducted landmark clinical studies into the medical efficacy of marijuana, revealing benefits extending well beyond symptom relief for AIDS or cancer. Defendants in medical marijuana cases, following the WAMM media model, wove sympathetic narratives to influence legal rulings and affect the politics of pot. Ultimately, a boundless medical marijuana marketplace, with opportunistic pot doctors doling out recommendations for conditions severe or benign, fueled the cannabis green rush. The market blurred the distinction between medical marijuana and marijuana destined for recreational use. It pitched medicinal healing with the pure joy of pot. It offered soothing with seduction. A law enforcement backlash percolated. New federal challenges loomed.

Just before the eighth anniversary of the DEA raid, Valerie Corral appeared on a speaker’s platform inside a circus tent behind the San Jose

Convention Center. At a massive medical cannabis trade show called HempCon, she talked about the emotional power of the Wo/Men's Alliance for Medical Marijuana, of honoring its dead, of enduring the federal raid and waging a legal battle with the DEA. Few people filled the chairs before her to listen. At a nearby booth for a stoner magazine, *Skunk*, bosomy spokesmodels—"Mary" and "Jane"—signed autographs and posed for pictures. Elsewhere, pot doctors and physician assistants greeted throngs of "patients," charging trade-show rates of fifty dollars and up for people who filled out brief questionnaires to get medical marijuana recommendations allowing them to legally use or cultivate cannabis. At a Proposition 215 patients-only sampling area, booths for retail-style marijuana dispensaries trotted out their best medicines. A line of fit-looking young people awaited admission, resembling tourists boarding a Napa Valley wine train. "I thought the WAMM consciousness would take off," Valerie Corral told her small audience. "It didn't. The dispensaries did."

Despite its transformative power for the marijuana movement, the WAMM consciousness had been rendered quaint, and obsolete, by California's fast-evolving medical marijuana industry. WAMM, and its sick and dying, engendered enduring political and social support for the use of medical cannabis. Now others reaped unanticipated rewards.