

# Collective endurance



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL FILE

A decade after raid, lasting impacts from famed WAMM marijuana bust



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

ABOVE: While other Wo/Men's Medical Marijuana Alliance members roll marijuana cigarettes, Valerie Corral talks about the raid on her pot farm 10 years ago. In the background are photos of deceased WAMM members. TOP: Valerie and Michael Corral stand in the barren dirt of their marijuana farm 10 years ago after federal agents raided their farm and ripped out all the pot plants.

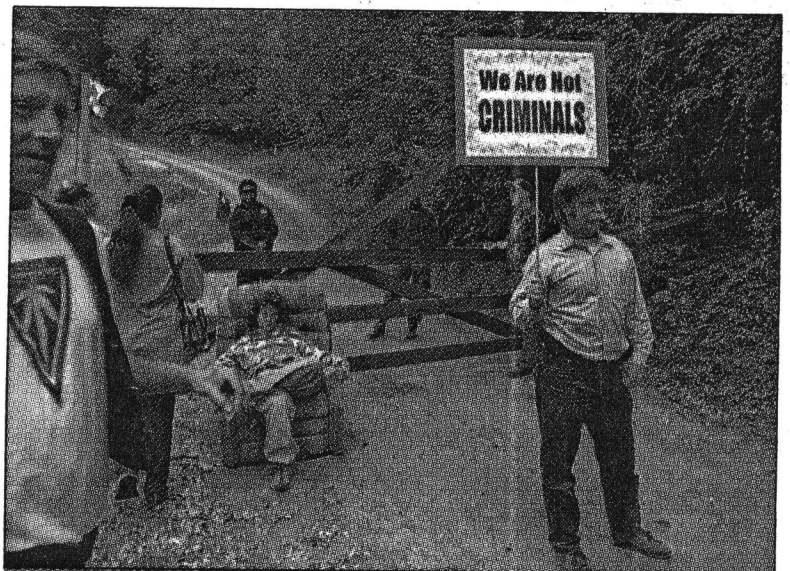
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DAVENPORT — On Sept. 5, 2002, the country was debating whether to invade Iraq to rid the country of weapons of mass destruction, just as it was bracing for the first anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks. Stocks were still down, but the Oakland A's had just notched their record 20th straight win.

Early that morning, 30 federal Drug Enforcement Agency-led law enforcement officers stormed the Wo/Men's Medical Marijuana Alliance, a high-profile collective with a small pot farm outside Davenport, chopping down plants and setting off a furor with lasting impacts on the statewide medical marijuana debate that endures today.

"I just remember waking up at 6:45 a.m., because I heard vehicles in the driveway of the house I was in," recalled WAMM's Mike Corral recently, who looked out to see agents carrying a

SEE WAMM ON A2



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Patients and protesters gathered at the gates of the Corral's marijuana farm as federal agents ripped out all of the pot plants 10 years ago.



# WAMM

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battering ram. "We always knew that there was this possibility of the feds doing something. [But] at the time, we were the darlings of the medical marijuana movement."

Founders Mike and Valerie Corral were never charged, but the raid spurred a lengthy court case, contributed to local suspicions of federal law enforcement and beatified the Corrals as the spiritual center of the medical marijuana movement. Last week marked the 10th anniversary of the raid, and several key figures reflected on their roles.

"I think that event was one of the most important developments in the growth of understanding about medical marijuana in the country," said local attorney Ben Rice, part of an all-star legal team that leaped to the Corrals' defense.

But for a long time, prison was a real possibility. For Valerie Corral, the saga began when she heard boots crossing her porch. She knew who it was before she saw them, but said she was inoculated by calm.

## GUN TO HER HEAD

"Something happened when they pushed me to the ground and put a gun to my head," Corral recalled. "It's hard to say exactly what it was. I wouldn't say I felt safe with a gun to my head — I'm not trying to make light or change the image — but there was something that came together and strengthened inside of me."

For the next several hours, Corral says she bent the ears of federal agents about the miracles of medical marijuana. The Corrals were taken to a holding facility in San Jose, while patients, some of whom needed help walking, gravitated toward the Corrals' property and barricaded the police in.

Back in San Jose, agents asked the Corrals to help disperse the crowd, which they did.

"I didn't want the energy to shift away," Valerie Corral said. "I didn't want it to become a screaming match."

"I made this comment to an agent and said, 'What do we have here, a hostage exchange situation?'" Mike Corral said. "And he actually laughed a little bit."

It turned out to be a wise move. Sympathetic to broad swaths of the community, the Corrals were embraced, with a medical marijuana giveaway even organized on the steps of Santa Cruz City Hall.

"I always said it was like representing Mother Teresa," said Santa Clara University Law School professor Gerald Uelmen, of Valerie. "She is the most compassionate person I think I've ever encountered."

By this point, the story of the raid had gone national. Many states were following in California's Proposition 215's footsteps, and the Bush Administration seemed to be drawing a line in the dirt. Hundreds of reporters were on hand for the pot giveaway and



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

Wo/Men's Medical Marijuana Alliance members drop in at their clubhouse throughout the day.

CNN carried the story live.

"Virtually every mayor in, at that time, the last 20 years was there," Rice said.

Valerie Corral said she and Mike, now separated, spent the night in a hotel to avoid the risk of being taken back into custody before the big day.

## MEMBERS CARRY ON

WAMM members kept the collective going by scrounging together marijuana and distributing it, and the DEA appeared unaware the Corrals had recently secured an industrial office on Santa Cruz' Westside, which is still in use. But members said marijuana was in short supply, and that the raid contributed to the deaths of many.

"Sure, they were going to die anyway. It's just that they died faster than they should have. And in pain that they shouldn't have had, because they took the medicine away," said longtime WAMM member Leona Powell, while rolling joints recently at WAMM's Westside office.

The raid seemed divisive, not just among local police — who had long known the Corrals — but perhaps even among federal law enforcement.

Santa Cruz deputies did not participate, and then-San Jose Police Chief William Lansdowne later yanked his officers off a joint DEA marijuana task force that executed the raid.

Many WAMM members also believe the raid order came from Washington and surprised the local U.S. attorney's office. Deborah SilverKnight, a patient then and now, said she even got a call from then-Sheriff Mark Tracy telling her what had happened. Rice was alerted by the county's top jailer.

"It was very tragic. Surreal," SilverKnight said.

The Corrals moved to suppress evidence from the raid before it even went to a grand jury, and it was clear fairly early that they wouldn't be charged. (Within months, federal drug prosecutors would turn their attention to another co-op — a storefront called the Bay Area Laboratory Cooperative, or BALCO, signaling the federal effort to root illegal ste-

roids from pro sports.)

## VICTORY IN COURT

Nevertheless, WAMM members went on the offensive, suing the Justice Department. U.S. District Judge Jeremy Fogel eventually ordered that their farm be left alone, and the case stands as the only clear win for the medical marijuana movement in federal court.

WAMM struggles forward today. The collective was organized along Marxist principles — from each according to their abilities, to each according to their need — and has never been a cash register for its owners.

"We're connected to the people that we serve, and each of us serves one another," Corral said.

For all the well-placed criticism of the state's medical marijuana industry, WAMM's patients have always tended to be truly and severely ill. But it also acknowledges market realities, recently diversifying its product range and now offering cannabidiol-rich pot.

Richard Johnson, who has HIV, said many at WAMM mix marijuana with more traditional medicines. To control an illness, he added, one must be able to control their medicine.

"The beauty about this group is we have the support of people with very different illnesses coming here," Johnson said. "We share information about what helps you heal, both mentally and physically."

## REMEMBERING FRIENDS

The collective has had thousands of members over the years, and 361 have died. WAMM is collecting pictures of the deceased, assembling them into a mural in their Almar Street office. Valerie Corral seems to hold each one especially close, having visited many deathbeds.

"You think you know something," she said, "until you sit so close to something that you cannot imagine."

Most see the raid as backfiring on the federal government. WAMM was a public relations nightmare, and partly because of that, arguably a bigger legal problem for the feds than the

Corrals. Mike Corral believes a prosecution might have toppled federal drug laws.

Ten years later, the state is in the midst of another searching debate about medical marijuana and how much autonomy California should have regulating it, with many accusing President Obama's administration of backtracking on a hands-off pledge.

Several dispensaries have been targeted for raids, with federal prosecutors saying they are targeting marijuana profiteers — something Corral (who believes the pharmaceutical industry is preparing to enter the business) has criticized. And in an uncertain legal environment, many have shut their doors.

"I think it really taught the feds a lesson that they took to heart," said Uelmen, who brings his drug abuse law seminar students to WAMM. "I think it's still being taken to heart. The fact that all these other dispensaries are being raided but WAMM is openly operating reflects that we taught the feds to make some distinctions that there are legitimate patients out there whose health depends on marijuana."

## 'WE WON THE WAR'

And when asked about the legacy of the raid, Mike Corral is clear: it led to the expansion of dispensaries throughout the state and the country.

"Medical marijuana is a done deal, in the United States and worldwide," Corral said. "We won the war; it's just 'What are the terms of surrender going to be?'"

Valerie Corral said the raid also contributed to a personal evolution.

"It's interesting how it moved us toward becoming the people that we really wanted to be," she said. "To help us model ourselves after the many activists, civil rights activists that had gone before us and taught us, and taught the world to awaken. To recognize that we're walking among need, and great suffering. To become what we wanted to be as human beings. To offer something that's bigger than ourselves to other people."

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