

Pot club struggles for financial survival

Drugs
By SHANNA McCORD
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SANTA CRUZ — Santa Cruz's oldest marijuana club has seen a precipitous drop in donations that sustain the organization since the federal government raided its gardens five years ago, and organizers are worried they will have to scale back their operations or even close.

Wo/Men's Alliance for Medical Marijuana has reduced the amount of marijuana given away as it struggles to stay in business and continue serving its 175 members, many seriously ill with terminal cancer or AIDS.

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MIKE CORRAL, WAMM CO-FOUNDER

"It's dire," WAMM co-founder Mike Corral said. "Not too far in the future we'll run out of what's available in our bank accounts now. It's a matter of months not a year or years."

The organization, which opened in

April 1993 to grow a communal marijuana garden for patients to share, costs about \$150,000 to operate each year, Corral said.

Donations, which they depend on for the bulk of their budget, have been down at least 60 percent for the past couple of years, he said.

Money problems for WAMM started after a raid by the federal Drug Enforcement Agency in September 2002 when the pot farm was stripped clean and 130 of the organization's marijuana plants were seized. Corral and his wife, Valerie Corral, were arrested during the raid.

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Valerie and Mike Corral in their uprooted pot farm, raided by federal agents in September of 2002. Since the raid, their donations have dropped dramatically.

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Pot

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Since then, membership has fallen slightly and donations have dropped dramatically, which has made it difficult to take care of existing patients, Corral said.

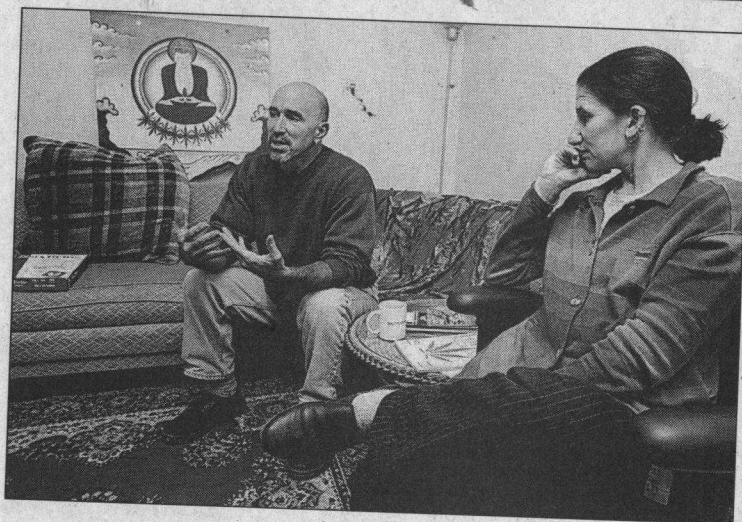
The organization has asked patients to cut back on the amount of marijuana they use to make sure there's enough for everyone who needs it, he said.

Faced with the prospect of closing their administrative office on Almar Avenue in Santa Cruz, WAMM has made a plea by writing e-mails to the public to contribute \$5 a month so "we can keep this vision alive."

"If each of us contributes as little as \$5 a month, we can move political history," Valerie Corral wrote in an e-mail. "That's one trip to Starbucks, less than a movie."

Ken Sampson, owner of the Santa Cruz Patient Collective, a place for medical marijuana patients to buy the drug, received the Corrals' e-mail and is concerned for WAMM's future.

"They're extremely vital," Sampson said. "They're basically the grassroots of the medical marijuana movement. I'm looking to do what I can to help."



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Michael and Valerie Corral at their WAMM office on the Westside of Santa Cruz in January 2004.

If the pot club were to close, many sick people would be at a loss.

"If WAMM were to fold, very poor people would be unable to find medicine," Corral said. "It would cost the city and county more money to supply the services we supply."

Marijuana became legal in California in 1996 for people with serious illnesses, however, the federal government considers the drug illegal and has the authority to

confiscate marijuana, even if it's used for medicinal purposes.

The Corrals have been involved in a series of lawsuits against the federal government during the past 10 years to defend their right to use and distribute medical marijuana. Their legal cases have been covered by pro bono attorneys and are not eating into their operation budget, Corral said.

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