

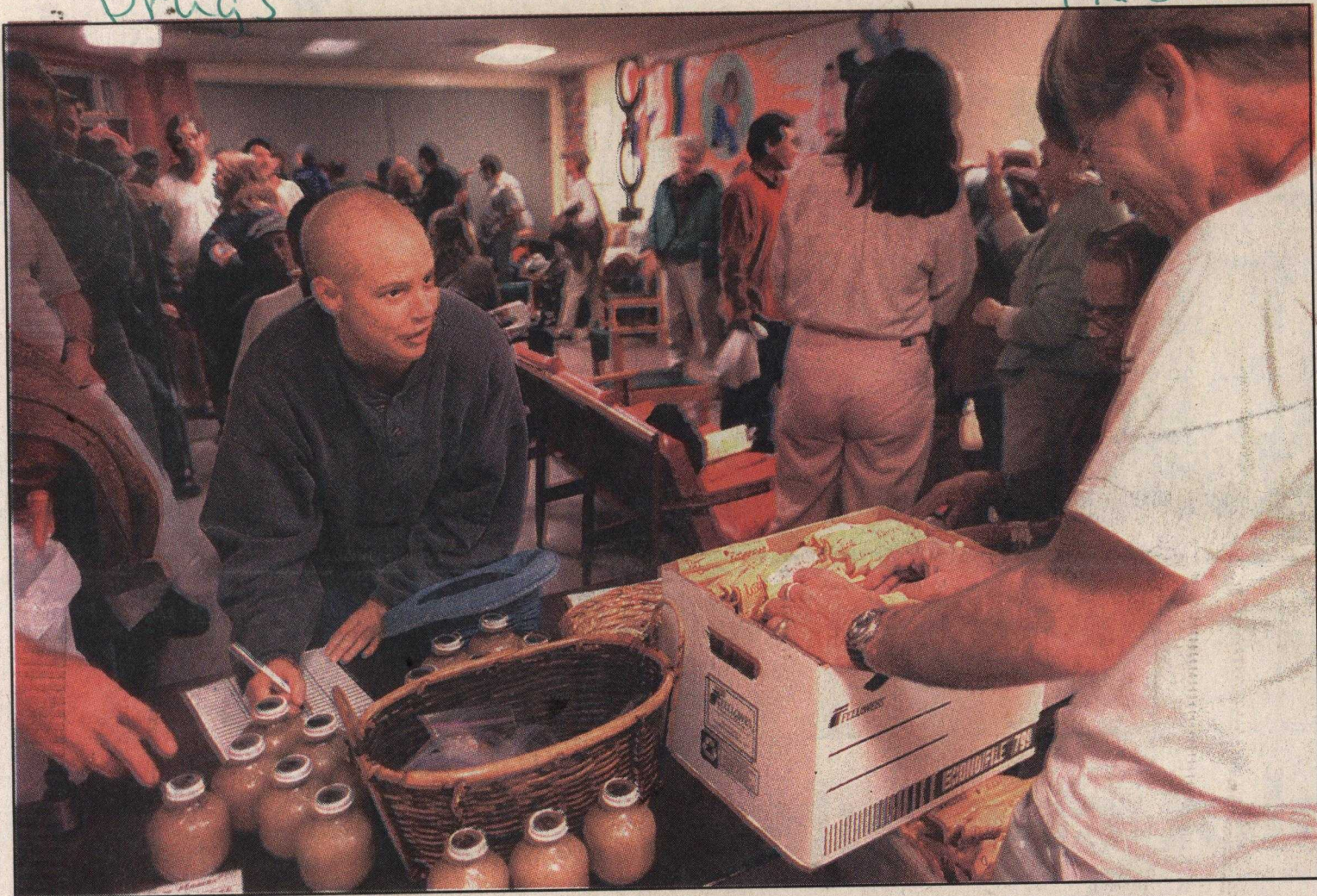
The Secret Garden

Drugs

4-16-2000



Inside the remote farm that supplies the Wo/Men's Alliance for Medical Marijuana



THE OLD warplane, a P-51 Mustang, roared toward Valerie Corral on a straight stretch of Highway 395 outside Reno.

It was a beautiful spring day in 1973, the kind that makes the desert shimmer with sunlight. Corral and her girlfriend could see the plane coming from a long way off.

It was flying so low over the asphalt that it looked like something out of a war movie.

Maybe the pilot needed to make an emergency landing, they thought. Maybe something was wrong.

So they pulled their red '65 Volkswagen bug off the highway and waited inside it.

But when the plane screamed past them with a sound like the leading edge of a hurricane, they shook their fists and cursed at the pilot for scaring them.

What happened next astounded them and an off-duty deputy sheriff who happened to be in the area.

As the two girls pulled their VW back onto the highway, the P-51, the kind of plane credited with 4,131 ground kills during World War II, made a looping turn and roared back after them at more than 300 mph.

"My girlfriend looked into the rear-view mirror and screamed," Corral says. "I looked up and saw the belly of the plane just above us."

The little Volkswagen seemed to lift

off the ground, then cartwheeled across the desert floor.

Both girls were thrown from the car.

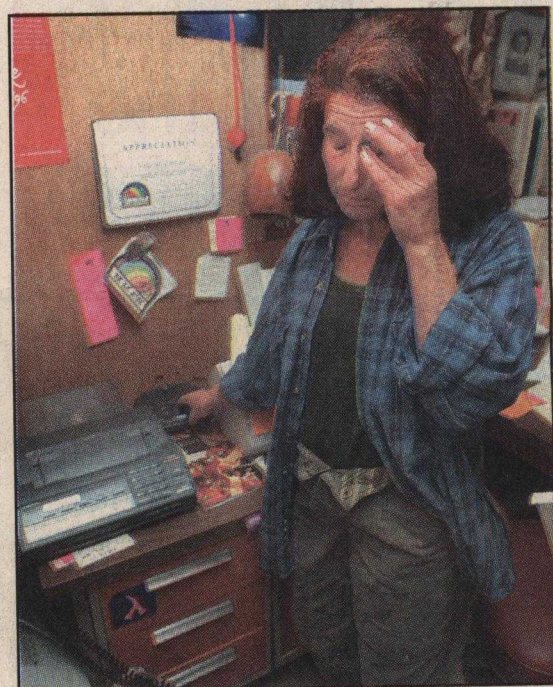
Corral suffered brain injuries that left her with epilepsy so severe she had five to six grand mal seizures every day for years. Her friend shattered most of the bones on the left side of her body.

But Corral doesn't hate the pilot who changed her life, or curse the day she decided to take that drive through the desert.

"It's interesting how something comes along and mixes life up so completely, nothing you thought before is the same," Corral says, standing in her house that looks out over a forested canyon in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

Who would have thought, for instance, that a P-51 warplane would be responsible for one day legalizing medical marijuana in the city of Santa Cruz?

Please see CORRAL — PAGE A4



Top: Marijuana is passed to a client.

Center: Pamela Cutler, who suffers from breast cancer, picks up her weekly ration in the form of marijuana-laced soy milk.

Bottom: Valerie Corral checks requests on her answering machine.

Corral

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It's hard to sneak up on Valerie and Mike Corral's house.

First you have to drive a mile up a dirt road so steep your car engine rumbles like it has bronchitis.

Then there is a gate and a pair of tail-wagging dogs who set up a symphony of barks at the first sign of a stranger.

There's a woman with a cell phone who calls ahead to let Mike and Valerie know you're coming, and a narrow dirt path that weaves through the forest for 200 yards.

Then you walk through redwood and poison oak, along the trunk of a eucalyptus tree that fell onto the path after being struck by lightning, and finally to a house that sinks into the side of a mountain the way a sleepy child sinks into his mother's lap.

"Hello," says Mike, waiting outside to meet you.

There is no way to arrive unnoticed, and Mike and Valerie like it that way.

Because when you grow marijuana — even if it's for sick people and even if there is a state law that allows you to do it — there are a lot of people you've got to worry about.

Gun-toting bandits could make off with a harvest worth hundreds of thousands of dollars on the street.

Or federal agents could drive up in vans and chop down the bright-green bushes because, according to them, it's still a crime to traffic in marijuana.

That's what all the secrecy is for. That's why Valerie and Mike station lookouts around their garden 24 hours a day once the plants start to mature and stretch toward the sun.

Why they don't want anyone to know where their home is.

Because, they say, if someone took their crop, who would take care of the 225 people who come to them with breast cancer, AIDS, arthritis and spinal cord injuries? The people who are looking for a way to ease their pain and, sometimes, the approach of death.

"If they just arrested us, we could deal with that," says Mike, a 50-year-old with a muscular build and shaved head, who says he doesn't smoke marijuana himself.

"But if they took our garden — what are those 225 people going to do?"

How do you decide?

Valerie and Mike's house is perched so high up on a mountain it's like sitting in the front seat of a helicopter.

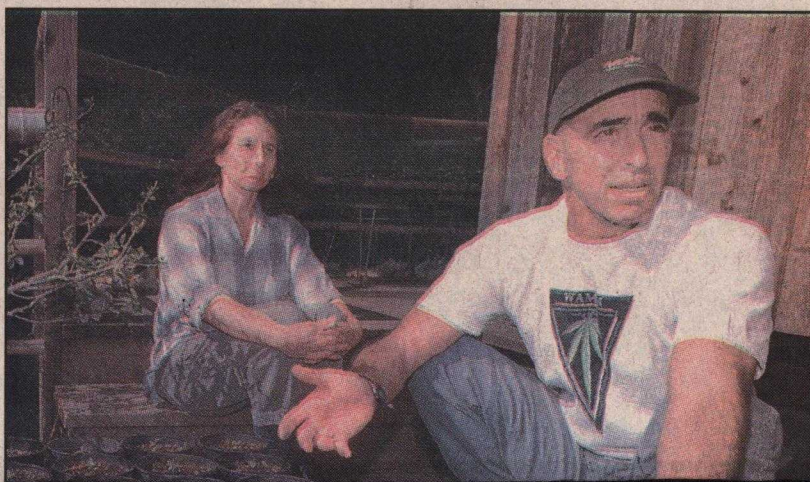
The house is all angles and windows pieced together like a jigsaw puzzle.

There's a bedroom they added on



Valerie Corral makes sure each client gets the right measure of marijuana.

Dan Coyro/Sentinel photos



of bed, couldn't eat, couldn't make lunch for her 2-year-old and 7-year-old.

"It makes it more tolerable," she says. "I don't know if I could continue with everything and deal with it all, without it."

Valerie, she says, is a remarkable woman.

Everyone here has to fill out an application and bring a verified diagnosis and a recommendation for medical marijuana from their doctor before they get their allotment. Even though the new Santa Cruz ordinance doesn't require a doctor's recommendation, WAMM has always made it part of the rules.

here. A guest room under construction there. When they first came, the house was so small it was like living in a treehouse.

The Corrals work as caretakers for the 160-acre property, so they don't pay rent. They grow most of their own food.

What little income they have comes from some land they developed with the \$40,000 settlement from Valerie's car crash.

This simple life is what allows them to give away a crop they could otherwise sell for \$6,000-\$10,000 a pound.

"It's easy to be generous when you have abundance," says Valerie, swinging her arm to take in the stunning view, the little house.

"I have a vastly wealthy life." Besides, the value of marijuana is not about money, but about relief. Medical marijuana should be sold as cheaply as aspirin, she says.

The office for the Wo/Men's Alliance for Medical Marijuana, the organization that persuaded the Santa Cruz City Council to allow medical marijuana to be grown and used under city protection, is just off the Corrals' kitchen, no bigger than a walk-in closet.

There is a plastic tub full of the week's sharp-smelling supply of pot, rows of botanical books, and 32 messages on the answering machine.

Valerie pushes the play button. "I'm in the last stages of liver disease," says a woman.

"I'm having trouble with nausea," says a young man with testicular cancer, whose voice already sounds too old.

Valerie puts her hand up to her mouth and sighs.

Ever since the city passed the ordinance, 100 more people have called.

They all want to join WAMM.

They all want their own weekly zip-lock bag of miracles.

"Tomorrow I have to inventory and see how much we have," says Mike, who will check the amount of marijuana they have stored for the year. "That way we can figure out how many more people we can let in."

How do you pick from among the sad stories?

How do you decide if the lady with liver disease or the man with testicular cancer gets put on the list first?

'Growing our own medicine'

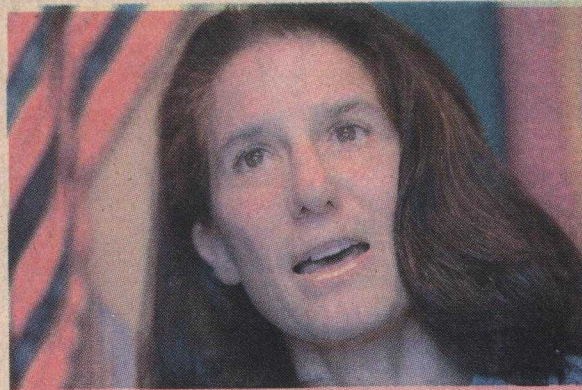
Valerie and Mike have been doing this for almost 20 years.

Their crusade began when Mike read an article in a medical journal that said marijuana could relieve epileptic seizures like the ones Valerie got after the car crash.

In those days, Valerie was having so many seizures she couldn't be left alone. The medications prescribed by her doctor — the ones that left her feeling like she was living under water — couldn't stop the electrical storms that went off in



Above, Kathy Nicholson and Tony Treadway met at a WAMM meeting and plan to marry soon. At right, Valerie Corral and her husband Mike at their remote mountain farm.



"I have never failed to learn something from someone who is sick."

— Valerie Corral, Wo/Men's Alliance for Medical Marijuana

her brain five or six times a day.

Once she walked into oncoming traffic. Another time she almost drowned in the bathtub.

Mike figured trying pot couldn't hurt, so they got a tin of bud, rolled it into neat little submarine-shaped joints, and Valerie began to smoke them. One joint a day seemed to do it.

Within four years, she says, she was off all her medications and the seizures stopped.

So Mike stuck a few marijuana plants in the ground next to their bell peppers and tomatoes.

"We were growing our own medicine," he says.

When one of their friends became ill with cancer, they gave him a few buds to help him combat the nausea of chemotherapy. Then they gave pot to a few more seriously ill people they knew.

Everything seemed to be going fine.

Until the cops came.

Under arrest

The first deputy sheriff was a nice guy.

He listened to the story of how Valerie needed the pot to stop her seizures; and even though he confiscated three plants drying in their house, he reached into the evidence bag, grabbed a handful of pot and set it on their kitchen counter.

"Here's enough to last you until those plants come in," he said, nodding toward seven small plants he'd left behind in their garden.

The next time, the deputies weren't so understanding.

In 1992 Valerie and Mike were arrested for growing five plants.

The couple decided to fight in

court, arguing that Valerie needed the plants to treat her epilepsy.

Out in front of the courthouse, surrounded by television cameras, Valerie listened as the district attorney vowed to seek the maximum penalty: three years in prison.

"My knees went weak," Valerie says. "If the cameras wouldn't have been there, I would have thrown up. Or cried."

What worried her the most was that she wouldn't be able to use marijuana in prison to control her seizures.

"I would become a prisoner of my epilepsy all over again," she says.

But Valerie won her case when the district attorney dismissed the charges a week before her trial was to begin because he said her case met all the conditions of a "necessity" defense.

A year later she was arrested again, but the district attorney declined to prosecute her on the charges.

With the arrests behind them, the Corrals formalized their marijuana giveaways and started WAMM.

Since then, there have been no more raids.

Santa Cruz County Sheriff Mark Tracy knows where they live, but leaves them alone as long as the Corrals stick to the strict guidelines they have set up for distributing marijuana only to the seriously ill — and as long as California's Proposition 215, which was passed in 1996 and allows for the medical use of marijuana, stays in effect.

"I appreciate her clear separation between marijuana as a health issue as opposed to those who use it inappropriately," Tracy says.

He'd feel differently, he says, if she was advocating the legalization



of marijuana.

Still, he's concerned.

"I worry about their safety," Tracy says.

With all that pot up there, who knows what lengths someone might go to steal it? He gave the Corrals a sheriff's hot-line number to call if it ever comes to that. Still, he worries whenever they talk publicly about their growing operation.

Not everyone agrees with Tracy's hands-off policy.

Spokeswomen for both the federal Department of Justice and the Drug Enforcement Agency said it doesn't matter why someone is growing marijuana.

"Federal law stipulates that growing, distributing and trafficking in marijuana is illegal," said Rogene Waite, a public information officer for the DEA in Washington, D.C., "and we enforce that law."

Federal penalties range from five to 40 years in prison and a \$2 million fine. But so far, no DEA agents have driven up the steep road to arrest the Corrals and take their crop.

"I don't think the federal government would do it — take marijuana from 200 ill people — but you never know," Mike says.

That's why he won't say exactly how many plants they've got growing in their garden.

Former Sheriff Al Noren, whose deputies raided the Corrals' crops in the '90s, scoffs at the notion of medical marijuana.

"All they want to do is smoke dope," he says. "People just want to get high and legalize it."

Hope in a zip-lock bag

There must be 100 people in the room, and the little storefront in

Santa Cruz is starting to feel like a greenhouse with the heat turned up too high.

There are people squeezed onto old vinyl couches. People lined up against the wall.

Their bodies tell their stories: women with the bald heads of chemotherapy, young men in wheelchairs, wire-thin men wasting away from AIDS.

Valerie, 48, stands in front of the little room, dressed in green cargo pants and a Mexican shirt. One of the things she believes is that people who are sick and dying need to connect — not just walk past each other, but walk through each other's lives.

So she insists on holding a meeting before volunteers hand out the baggies of pot and the marijuana muffins that sit on a folding table in one corner of the room.

A few people bolt for the front and get their pot — either too sick or too antsy to stick around — but the rest listen.

The group is having an art show. One of the members was just taken to Dominican Hospital with a brain tumor. Another member died unexpectedly a week ago.

Death is an everyday part of life here at the marijuana giveaways.

From an old green couch, Margo Karow listens.

She's 30, with two young children and breast cancer that was diagnosed when she was pregnant with her second child.

She's been fighting the cancer for a couple of years now, and sometimes it feels like the cancer is winning.

If it wasn't for the marijuana she gets weekly from WAMM, there would be days she couldn't get out

Volunteers check each person's name off a list before handing them their weekly package. Some get tiny plants to grow.

One man puts a \$5 donation on the table before picking up his baggie of marijuana. Another lays down a \$20 bill. The next man gives nothing.

A 1999 Institute of Medicine study says marijuana can offer medical relief.

Evidence shows marijuana controls nausea, stimulates appetite and relieves pain, the report says. It also reduces anxiety.

But, the report notes, there are health risks from smoking marijuana — like cancer and emphysema — and for many people there are drugs that work just as well.

But 48-year-old Kathy Nicholson doesn't believe so. She lifts up a hand that is as humped and gnarled as an old root.

She's got arthritis, and sometimes a few hits on a joint in the middle of the night is all that allows her to sleep. Other drugs don't make her feel as good.

"You see why I do this, the richness of the work," Valerie says later.

"I think I work with the most amazing humans. They are truly empowering."

Life's lessons

At her house, Valerie sinks into a chair next to the wood stove. Behind her are dozens of marijuana plants sprouting in metal cans on the deck — this year's crop.

She's learned a lot from her life, Valerie says.

She's learned how illness can make you stronger. How illness can become a blessing.

How marijuana can open the minds of people who are terminally ill.

She's witnessed 100 deaths herself and says that as death approaches, many turn to face it, instead of running from it.

They court death like a lover, she says. They embrace it.

And that, she says, has been a good lesson.

Some day, she says, she'd like to turn WAMM into a center for people who are dying — a place where they could work, live and heal spiritually.

Some day she'd like to see medical marijuana affordable for everyone, to see death treated the way her friends treated it when they held an old-fashioned wake for a woman who died recently, to see her study on marijuana published in a medical journal.

But right now, it's time to get this year's crop in the ground, to answer her phone messages, to pack up the next week's packages of pot.

"I have never failed to learn something from someone who is sick," Valerie says.

"I don't think I could do anything that would make me emotionally richer than this."