

# Corrals have become medical-marijuana martyrs

## FIELD OF DREAMS



Dan Coyro/Sentinel photos

Michael and Valerie Corral embrace on their medical-marijuana farm, which was stripped clean by raiding federal agents.

## Drugs 9-16-02 Odd twists leave couple in center of pot debate

By BRIAN SEALS

Sentinel staff writer

Mike Corral is a soft-spoken man with a love for all things that grow.

His wife, Valerie, with a shock of auburn hair, exudes a spiritual presence and has a bright smile.

Except for a few of life's twists and turns, the couple say they would be living a quiet, private life in the mountains.

"I love being in the garden," Mike Corral said, standing in a barren patch of dirt on the property where they live north of Davenport.

But life has been anything but quiet for the Corrals in recent days, or the past decade, for that matter. Willy-nilly, the unassuming couple has become something of a poster couple for the national medical-marijuana movement.

That was clear even before a small army of federal agents raided their property last week, plucking about 130 not-quite-mature plants grown for members of the Wo/Men's Alliance for Medical

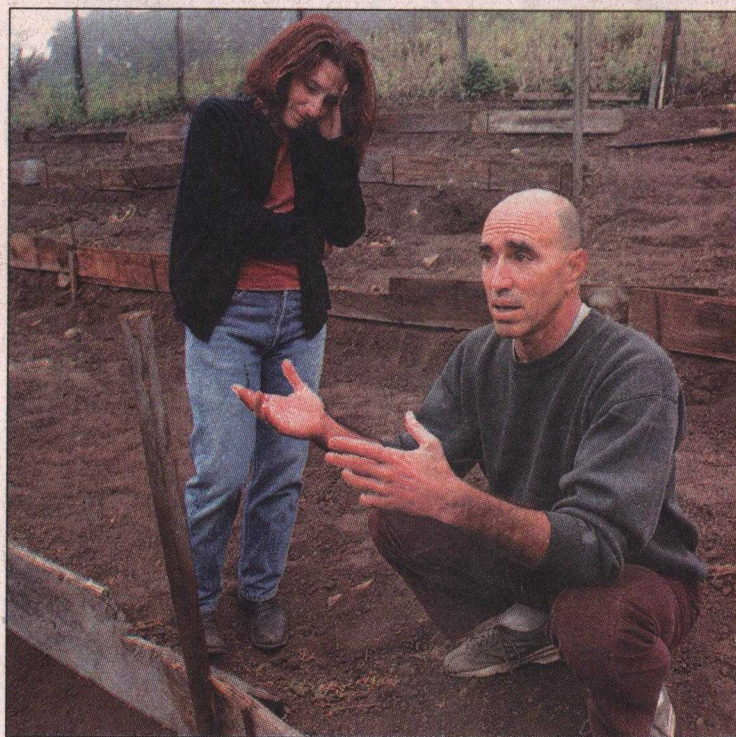
Marijuana, the local pot club Valerie runs.

The raid not only shocked the 238 members of the group, most of them terminally ill and dependent on the cooperative for medicinal pot, it disgusted a few area elected officials.

The Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors and Santa Cruz City Council passed resolutions condemning the raid. Council members have gone as far as to allow the alliance to use City Hall on Tuesday to distribute marijuana to its Please see **MARIJUANA** on **BACK PAGE**

**'They are definitely saints of the medical-marijuana movement.'**

STEPH SHERER, AMERICANS FOR SAFE ACCESS



'I love being in the garden,' says Michael Corral, with his wife, Valerie, at his side. An automobile accident in 1973 left Valerie with brain injuries that caused seizures. Marijuana was her only respite.



# Marijuana: Medical-marijuana proponents labeled as 'saints'

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members.

So the quiet life will have to wait for another day for the Corrals. This is the time to speak up, they say.

Medical marijuana may be a novel issue for some, but it is a 'life-and-death issue for others,' Valerie Corral said.

They're not in the fight for publicity or fame. They speak, they say, to show the nation and the world the faces of the sick people who need marijuana to ease their pain. They've spoken to just about every major newspaper in the state since the raid. USA Today was here for an interview and CNN is expected this week. That's along with a slew of news reports and editorials that have appeared across the country in the wake of the raid.

"The media is the way America speaks to one another," Valerie Corral said.

They dispute the notion they are glorifying drugs. In fact, they say, a Wo/Men's Alliance for Medical Marijuana gathering, with its sometimes emaciated and dying patients, can feel as emotionally troubling as it can be uplifting.

The couple knows first-hand how marijuana can seem like a godsend to people in pain. Valerie herself has been down that road.

An automobile accident in 1973, too

bizarre to even call freakish, left her with brain injuries that caused epilepsy. Valerie was a passenger in a 1965 Volkswagen bug, and was cruising in the desert outside Reno, Nev., with a girlfriend.

The teens spotted a World War II-era P-51 plane flying unusually low. They pulled to the side. The plane whizzed past.

As they pulled the VW back onto the highway, the plane made a looping turn and roared toward them. The Bug lifted off the ground, and both girls were thrown from the car.

She got a \$40,000 settlement. But years of traditional medicine left her in a stupor and frustrated. She had so many seizures she couldn't be left alone.

Then one day Mike read an article in a medical journal that said pot could relieve seizures like the ones Valerie was suffering.

She tried a joint.

Within four years, she was off all traditional medicines and her seizures were a thing of the past.

The story could have ended there. The Corrals could be living in their mountain digs, taking care of themselves, growing some vegetables. A look around their garden reveals Mike's gardening prowess. Corn and tomatoes grow nearby the now-vacant pot plot. He experiments with tropi-

cal fruits.

But in 1992 they were busted.

That time it was by the county Sheriff's Office, operating with state marijuana patrols. After a preliminary hearing, the charges against Valerie Corral were dropped based on a medical-necessity defense. Another raid in 1993 resulted in no prosecution.

When word of the first arrest got out in the media, other sick people became interested. The collective known as Wo/Men's Alliance for Medical Marijuana emerged.

"I guess we have Al Noren to thank for that," Corral said, alluding to the former Santa Cruz County sheriff.

While marijuana has been the center of the collective, it's about more than that. Members help one another. They are a community. Valerie has spent countless final moments with members who are dying.

"That's part of the gift I'm offered," she said. "I feel honored to be asked to be there."

That commitment eventually pushed the Corrals to the forefront of the medical-marijuana debate. They helped craft state Proposition 215, a voter-approved initiative passed in 1996 that allows marijuana for medical use.

"They are definitely saints of the medical-marijuana movement," said Steph Sherer of the national medical-marijuana group Americans for Safe

Access.

However, the federal Drug Enforcement Administration has been unwavering in its take on WAMM and medical marijuana in general. Marijuana is against federal law. Period. Forget the state proposition, the feds say. Federal law is the law of the land.

And until the courts or national politicians wade into the debate, the DEA raids and arrests will continue.

That irks people like the Corrals and their supporters, who question why the feds are targeting groups like theirs during a time of international terrorism.

Members of the collective, meanwhile, fear for its future.

No charges have been filed yet against the Corrals, nor have motions to forfeit the property that the federal agents raided. The government has a five-year statute of limitations to file an action, though.

For the Corrals, the past week has been a blur. They are angered that their government has chosen to pick a fight with sick people but grateful for the support they've received locally.

"I come to tears," Mike said while standing in his barren garden. "It all blends together, the tears, the laughter, the fear, the joy."

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