

Pot arrests draw statewide protests

Medical marijuana stirs debate, legal questions

Drugs
By BRIAN SEALS

SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

SANTA CRUZ — A day after federal agents uprooted its garden and arrested two of its leaders, a local medical-marijuana club remained defiant, while the state's top prosecutor asked the federal government for answers.

"We consider this a minor interference by the federal government in the lives of sick people," said the recorded message on the phone line of the Santa Cruz-based Wo/Men's Alliance for Medical Marijuana.

State Attorney General Bill Lockyer, meanwhile, requested a meeting with federal Drug Enforcement Agency director Asa Hutchison and Attorney General John Ashcroft to discuss the arrests of Valerie and Michael Corral.

The couple was arrested Thursday during a DEA raid of their home north of Davenport. Agents also destroyed about 130 marijuana plants, which were destined for the club's 238 members.

Also Friday, protests were carried out in front of federal offices in San Francisco, Oakland, San Jose, and Washington, D.C. There was also a protest of about 40 people at the Santa Cruz County Courthouse.

Meanwhile, Valerie and Michael Corral were left to ponder their legal future.

While the Corrals were arrested on suspicion of possessing mari-



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Caregiver Barbara Conner, left, is comforted by Susan Durst during Friday's protest rally at the Santa Cruz County Courthouse.

juana with intent to distribute, they were released later that day and no charges have been filed by the U.S. Attorney's Office.

A spokeswoman for the U.S. Attorney's Office in San Francisco would only say charges have not been filed. Debbie Young said there is a five-year statute of limitations and that the office does not comment beyond what is available on public record.

"We generally don't confirm we're not going to do something," she said.

Meanwhile, local attorney Benjamin Rice said he was assembling a legal team to defend the Corrals, if needed.

Rice said he too has been unable to get information from the U.S.

Attorney's Office.

"The proverbial other shoe has yet to drop," Rice said.

Other cases in the state offer no clear picture of what will happen next.

In four other cases this year, the DEA has raided medical marijuana gardens but no charges have been filed, according to the California chapter of the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws.

In one high-profile Los Angeles case, though, the federal government has begun property forfeiture proceedings. The Los Angeles Cannabis Resource Center in West Hollywood was raided by federal agents in October without the cooperation of local law enforcement.

In June, the federal government moved to confiscate the resource center's building.

"This could be a copy cat of what happened in West Hollywood," Rice said.

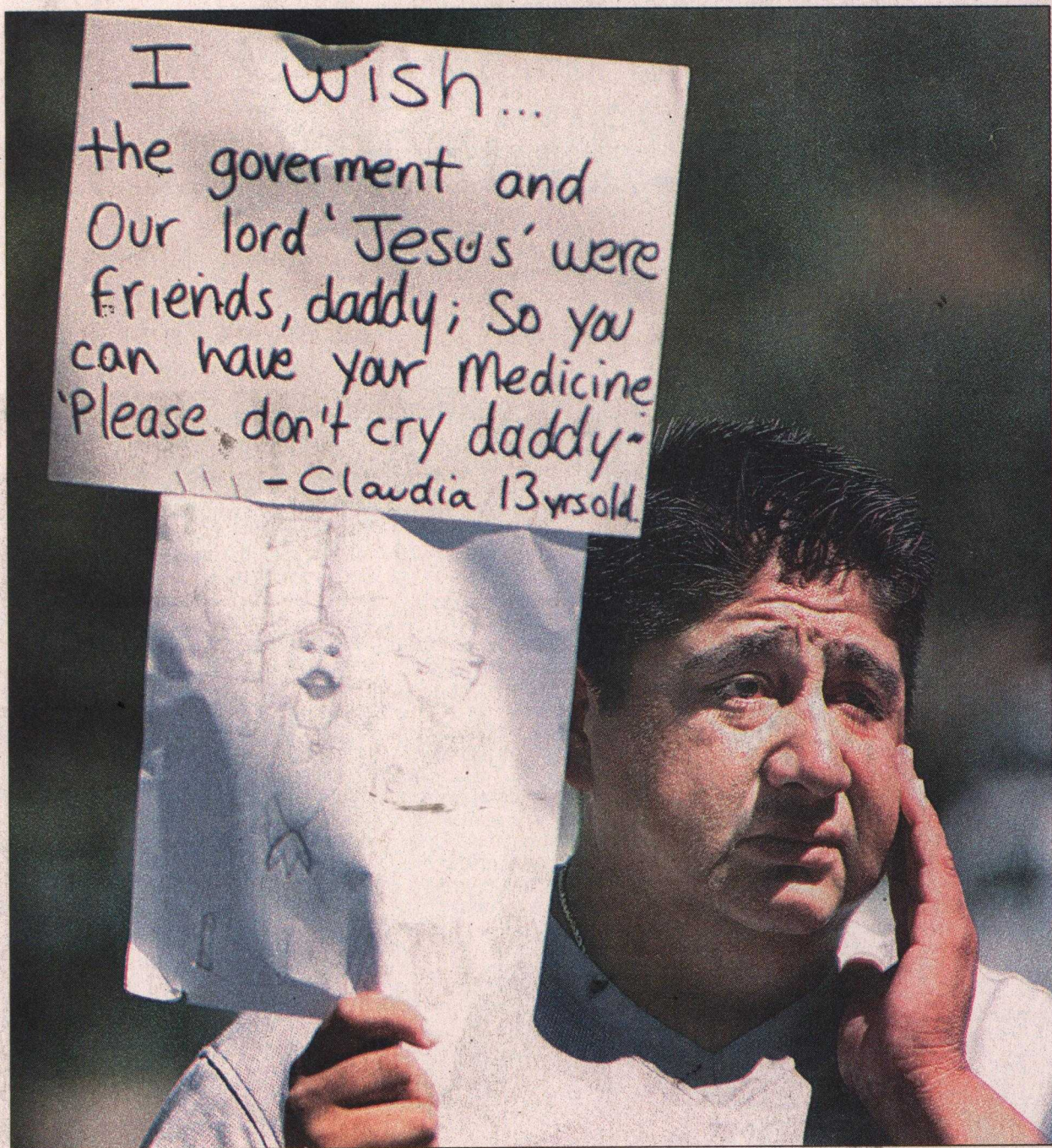
The local arrests appear to be part of an increase in medical-marijuana arrests by federal agents since Sept. 11. Since then, there have been 21 medical-marijuana related cases in the state involving 37 people, according to the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws.

"There's no doubt there has been a team of DEA agents infiltrating clubs in California," said Dale Gierenger of NORML.

Please see **POT** on **BACK PAGE**

'Under federal authority, there is no such thing as medical marijuana.'

RICHARD MEYER, DEA SPOKESMAN



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Medical marijuana client Cesar Coto of Santa Cruz at Friday's County Government Center rally to protest the DEA's action against a local grower.

Pot

Continued from Page A1

As with other federal raids in California, the local case pits states' rights vs. federal authority.

"Under federal authority, there is no such thing as medical marijuana," DEA spokesman Richard Meyer told the Sentinel.

But under Proposition 215 passed in 1996, the use of marijuana for medicinal purposes is legal under state law. That leaves local authorities trying to implement the voter-approved state proposition at odds with federal enforcers.

"This has to be resolved at the federal level," county Sheriff Mark Tracy said Friday. "That became very apparent yesterday."

U.S. Rep. Barney Frank, D-Massachusetts, sponsored a bill last year that would allow states to regulate medical pot. U.S. Rep. Sam Farr, the

'With all the difficult problems the world faces, I find it hard to believe the DEA should further punish sick people, most of whom are terminally ill, by arresting them and carting them off to jail. This is truly outrageous.'

U.S. REP. SAM FARR

Carmel Democrat whose district includes Santa Cruz, is among 13 other representatives from California to sign on to the bill.

Farr said the DEA should focus on more pressing woes, calling Thursday's action "outrageous."

"With all the difficult problems the world faces, I find it hard to believe the DEA should further punish sick people, most of whom are terminally ill, by arresting them and carting them off to jail," Farr said in a statement. "This is truly outrageous."

Likewise, Lockyer questioned the DEA's actions in Santa Cruz County

and the rest of the state and requested to meet with Hutchison and Ashcroft to discuss policy.

"A medical provider such as the Santa Cruz collective represents little danger to the public and is certainly not a concern which would warrant diverting scarce federal resources away from the fight against domestic methamphetamine production, heroin distribution or international terrorism to cite just a few more worthy priorities," Lockyer said.

Contact Brian Seals at bseals@santa-cruz.com.