

Less of a bash, more issues to hash - Focus of marijuana festival shifts from freedom to party to freedom from pain

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News Staff Reporter

Drizzling rain and cold weren't enough to keep about 900 people Saturday from congregating on the University of Michigan Diag to hear music and speeches calling for the legalization of marijuana.

They came for the annual Ann Arbor Hash Bash, held each year on the first Saturday in April. This was the 34th bash.

The number of participants was smaller than last year's estimated 1,500, but organizers said they were pleased with the turnout.

U-M freshman Amy Steiker said she came to check out the Hash Bash and support legalizing marijuana for medical purposes only. "I don't support it for all uses," she said.

Lila Frazer of Traverse City said medical use is a first step, and legalizing marijuana for all proposes is the ultimate goal.

Some participants, clad with fake marijuana leaves around their necks and heads, waved signs, beat drums, circulated petitions to legalize marijuana and handed out information that said the plant had various benefits.

Organizer Josh Soper, a U-M junior, said the intention of the rally was to bring the issue of legalizing marijuana to light instead of being "a smoke in" as it had been the case in previous years. Soper is director and founder of the U-M chapter of the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws.

NORML's Web site says responsible marijuana use is not harmful to society and that laws against marijuana and their enforcement cause more harm than the use of marijuana itself.

But the Partnership for a Drug-Free America says risks are associated with marijuana use. The group's Web site says that the risks include short-term effects, such as problems with memory and learning, trouble with thinking and problem solving, loss of motor coordination, increased heart rate and anxiety. The site also says marijuana smoke contains the same cancer-causing chemicals found in tobacco smoke.

The event began with an hour of live music by Hazy Jane and Buddha Fulla Rymez, followed by speeches and a demonstration near the City Hall. Festivities continued with vendors and live music on Monroe Street until 5 p.m.

While the rain ceased when the event began around 11 a.m., participants shivered in temperatures hovering near 40 degrees as they listened to speakers urge the crowd not to smoke joints on the Diag because the minimum punishment for smoking on campus is a \$100 fine and/or 90 days in jail.

The university's Department of Public Safety enforces state law. Off campus, however, possession of marijuana is a civil infraction with a \$25 fine in the city of Ann Arbor.

Poet John Sinclair, a 1960s activist, urged participants to fight for the right to legalize marijuana. "We will continue to work to alter the laws in this town," he said.

The first Hash Bash was held after Sinclair's 1969 arrest and imprisonment for possessing two marijuana joints.

U-M spokeswoman Diane Brown said Saturday's event was peaceful and no one was cited or arrested for illegal activities. Ann Arbor police did not report any violations or arrests associated with the event. Last year, six people were arrested for possession of marijuana during the event.

Scio Township Trustee Chuck Ream, who was one of the speakers Saturday, said organizers are discussing moving the event to May for better weather and turnout.

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