

Michigan cannabis activists reflect on a lifetime of work

Dec 06, 2018

By Amy Biolchini



Poet and former Ann Arborite John Sinclair speaks to about 2,000 people on the University of Michigan Diag during Hash Bash 2008. "I like to get high," Sinclair said. "I believe I have a right to get high." Leisa Thompson

It started with two joints in 1967.

It stopped with 2,356,422 votes Nov. 6.

The decades-long battle to legalize marijuana has come to fruition in Michigan. For longtime activists, legalization day -- Dec. 6, 2018 -- has a deep meaning.

"It's exhilarating that we win, simply because of all those common people, those everyday people who don't get to influence the law, who go to work; they don't have to work about the police jumping on them and taking their house, their car, their children," said Chuck Ream, an Ann Arbor cannabis activist.

"The law that was destroying so many people's lives was so different from what they wanted."



Chuck Ream lights up a joint in his Ann Arbor home in 2010. Ream smokes marijuana to help with a gastrointestinal problem he's had since 1968. Ream said he could barely function in the mid 1970's until he started smoking marijuana on a daily basis. Lon Horwedel

The godfathers

The godfathers of the new recreational marijuana law in Michigan aren't stoners or anarchists. They're a former kindergarten teacher -- Ream -- and a former insurance broker who once ran as a Republican in Grosse Pointe -- Tim Beck.

Ream and Beck have spent two decades working together on both local and statewide ballot initiatives. Separately, they were behind the 2004 medical marijuana legalization efforts in Ann Arbor and Detroit before they met and joined forces.

With the help of the Marijuana Policy Project in 2008 with Beck's direction, medical marijuana passed in Michigan. Now legalization -- their pursuit from the beginning -- is cemented.

"I just did it because it was the right thing to do -- that's just the altruistic reason. It's a matter of self-interest. I spent about \$200,000 in legal fees," Beck said, explaining he financed a legal battle with the city of Detroit over a ballot initiative in 2012. "Some guys spend \$200,000 on a boat."



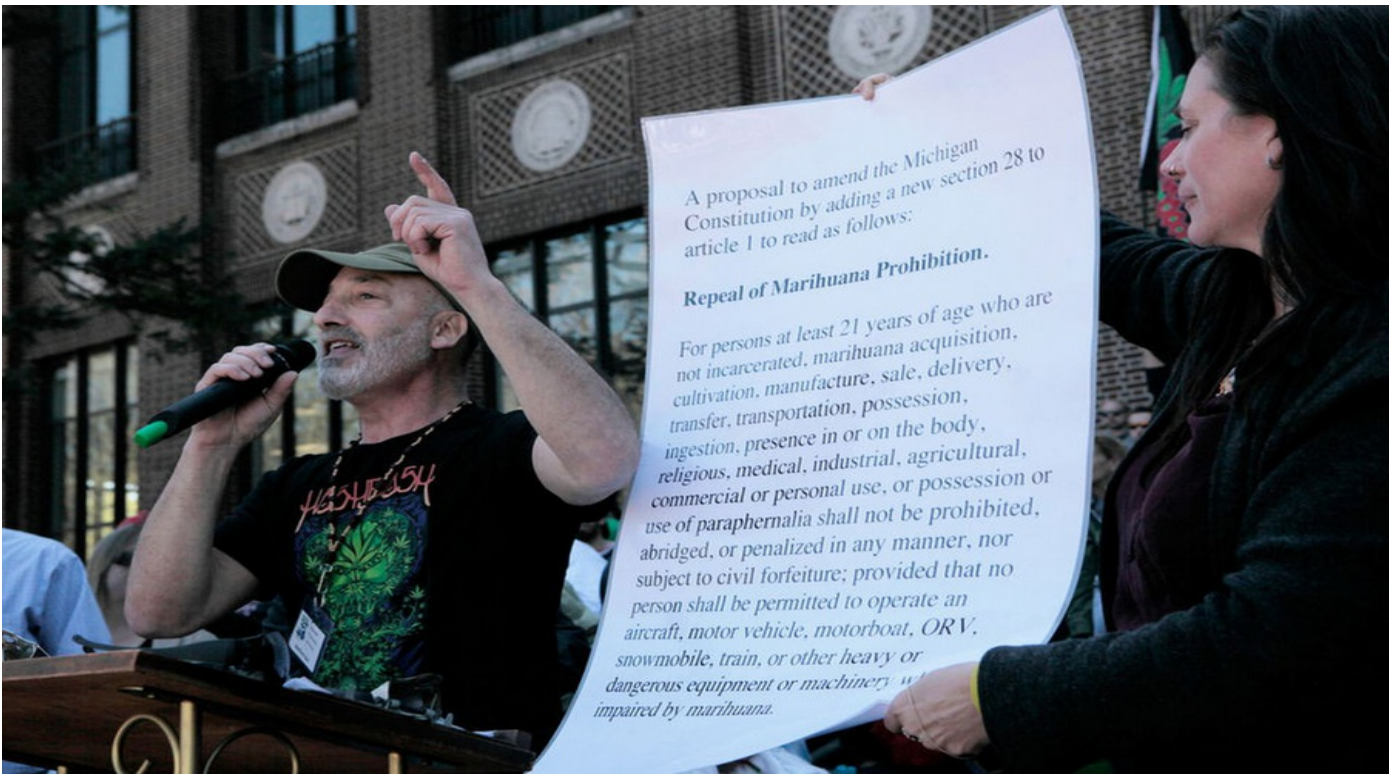
People smoke marijuana at the Monroe Street Fair in Ann Arbor in 2008. Leisa Thompson

Tipping Michigan's scales on marijuana has been an incremental push both with medical and now adult-use: first decriminalization efforts city by city, then statewide.

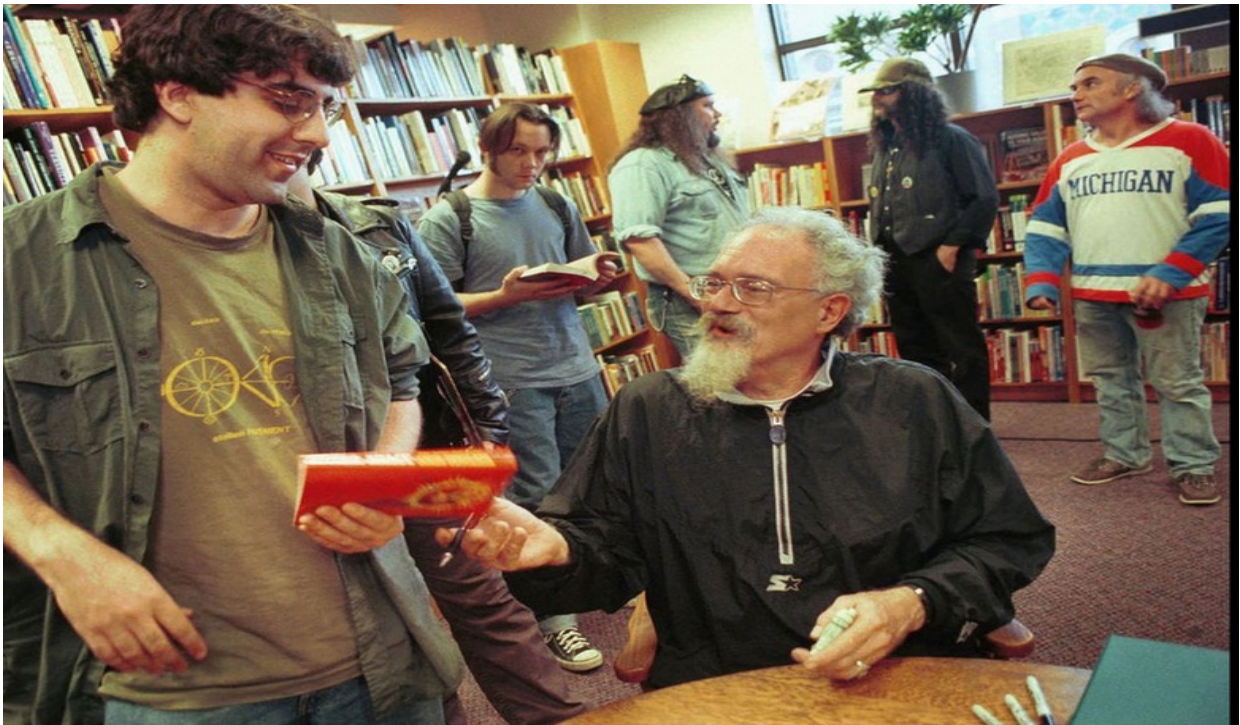
"The polling has changed pretty quickly over the last 10 years, and I think much of that is due to the fact that we've had medical marijuana in this state and people have grown accustomed to it being in our society and they have experience that their friends and relatives have benefitted from it and the sky has not fallen," said Matt Abel, the co-founder of Cannabis Counsel and one of the authors of the medical marijuana law.

The road for cannabis activists in Michigan has been paved with arrests, prison sentences and long nights.

"I missed a lot of potlucks and a lot of smoke-downs," Ream said.



Matthew Abel, member of the Michigan National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws (NORML) Board of Directors speaks while event MC Charmie Gholson holds up a proposal to amend the Michigan Constitution during Hash Bash 2012 at the University of Michigan Diag. Chris Asadian



Dan Santamaria, left, of Ann Arbor, chats with John Sinclair, former White Panthers Party leader, a poet and a counter-culture icon, after buying Sinclair's autographed book "Guitar Army," at Borders Books Music & Cafe in downtown Ann Arbor on Tuesday evening, June 6, 2000. (Elli Gurfinkel

Discord

The disconnect between the rule of law and its impact on people has fueled the legalization movement in Michigan.

That sense of discord boiled up in 1971, when John Lennon and Yoko Ono sang "John Sinclair" at the Crisler Center in Ann Arbor -- a concert supporting the song's namesake, who was sentenced to prison for nearly 10 years for possessing two joints. Days later, the Michigan Supreme Court freed Sinclair. The sentiment drummed up at the concert led to the first Hash Bash in Ann Arbor a year later in 1972

Sinclair, a poet and activist, said he thought legalization would come in 1977 when Jimmy Carter was president. It didn't happen. He quit worrying about it.



A Hash Bash party at U-M Diag leads to arrests in Sept. 1973. (File photo | The Ann Arbor News)



A policeman patrols the scene during a Hash Bash party at the U-M Diag in Sept. 1973. (File photo | The Ann Arbor News)



John Sinclair, who was made famous after being arrested and sentenced to 10 years in prison for giving two marijuana cigarettes to undercover narcotics agents, spoke to a crowd of people in the University of Michigan Diag at the 40th Annual Hash Bash in Ann Arbor, Mich. on April 2, 2011. (Angela J. Cesere

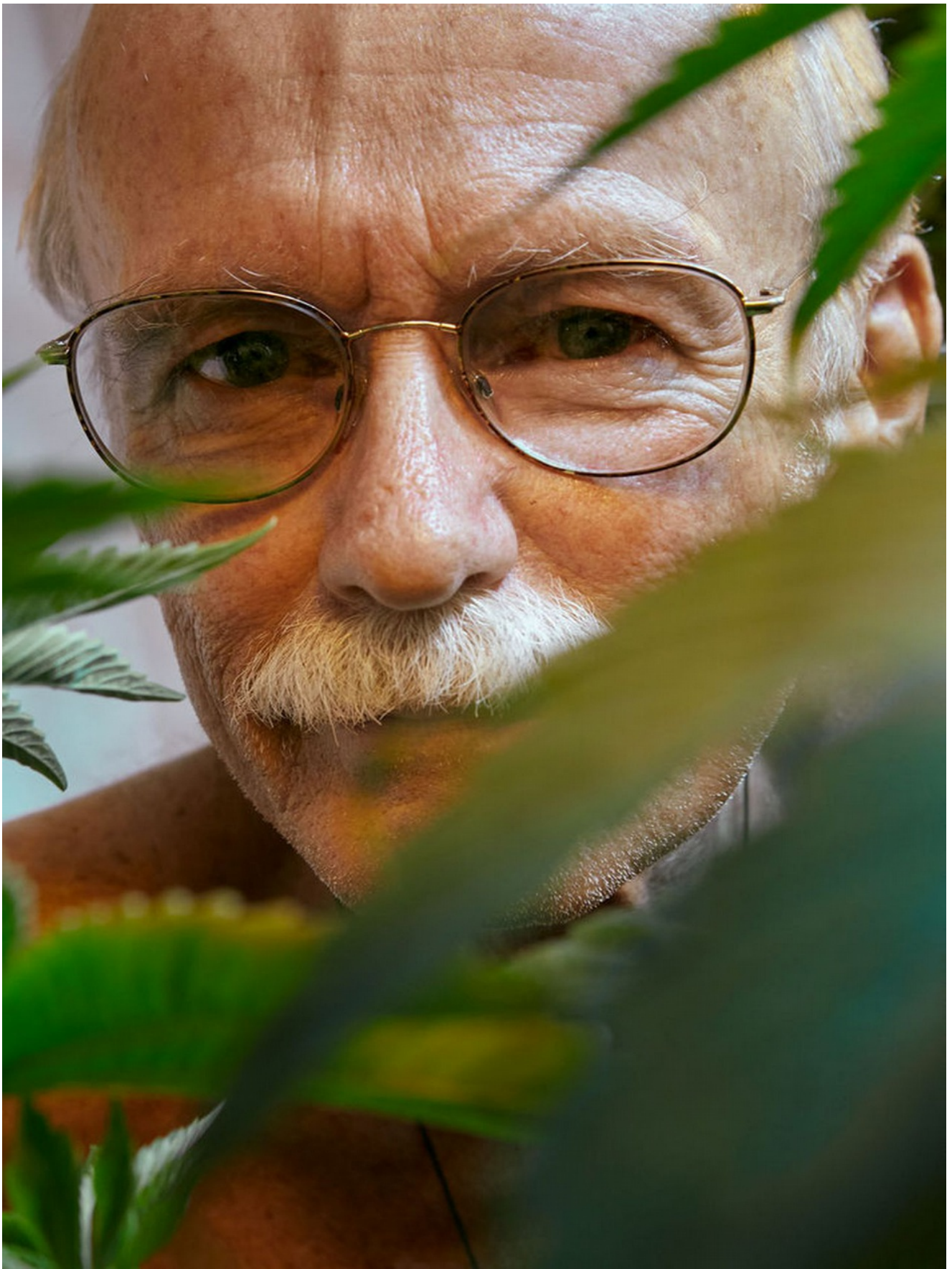
"The marijuana movement is the most progressive of all in America because it uses the law to change things," Sinclair said. "This is as American as it gets. You can pass your own laws, you can take your initiative. We've proved that again and again."

Over the years, Hash Bash in Ann Arbor grew from a political protest to a party. Hundreds of people would attend annually; but the political will never truly emerged.

"People would say, 'Oh my God if we could only harness the energy from Hash Bash,'" Beck said. "People that attend Hash Bash -- they're just interested in marijuana; they're not interested in political change."

Beck said the movement shed the tie-dyed stoners and anarchists, and instead found people who were serious and could speak in front of a TV news camera: people motivated to change the system. A grassroots network of about a dozen people across the state were right for the job.

"Practically everyone knew someone who had been arrested and they were angry," Beck said.



Chuck Ream poses for a portrait behind his cannabis plants in his Ann Arbor home on Tuesday, May 22, 2018. (Jack Zellweger)

A Sunday brunch

The recreational marijuana ballot initiative that voters passed Nov. 6 was born out of a 2015 Sunday brunch Ream held annually for advocates in the movement. This particular brunch featured rolled-up joints on nice little china plates.

The Michigan Responsibility Council was attempting to take control over the legalization language -- and so MILEgalize stepped in to prevent the sway to special interests.

They failed to collect signatures in a way that pleased the Michigan Bureau of Elections, and the effort stopped in 2016. Enough headlines caught the attention again of the D.C.-based Marijuana Policy Project. The national campaign previously was aiming for legalization in Michigan in 2020, but now 2018 was the target.



Chuck Ream, co-founder of the Safer Michigan Coalition group, speaks to about a dozen people gathered at Court Street Grill in Saginaw in 2014. The group gathered to discuss the Coalition for a Safer Saginaw group's proposal on the Nov. 4 ballot, which seeks to decriminalize marijuana in the city. Mark Tower



Chuck Ream of Ann Arbor, who says he has smoked marijuana every day for the past 47 years, raises his fist before speaking at the 43rd annual Hash Bash on the University of Michigan Diag Saturday, April 5, 2014. Brianne Bowen

Though there was a disconnect between marijuana advocates in Michigan -- something Beck will describe as incrementalists versus idealists -- both sides shelved their egos for the campaign.

The Marijuana Policy Project brought fundraising savvy and smooth policy writing expertise that Beck believes was crucial to success in the Nov. 6 election.

Ultimately, 56 percent of voters said yes to legalizing marijuana.

"Now we've got the upper hand," Ream said. "All those years we were struggling to even get the time of day -- to even get these guys to acknowledge we existed. It's going to have to end up being what the voters want. The only thing that matters to us is winning in the real world."

Legalization day changes Ream's life in more ways than one.

"I will be legal for the first time in my life. I'll get a lock box and lock up whatever I have," Ream said of his marijuana. "But now I can just say, 'Go get it at a dispensary; you don't have to bother me.'"



A supporter whoops it up in support of the legalization of marijuana during the 2004 Hash Bash on the Diag of the University of Michigan campus where thousands gathered to drum up support for marijuana and it's benefits, medicinal and otherwise. Lon Horwedel