

Marijuana Advocate

"I WAS NOT one of the '60s radicals," says Dale Gieringer '68 of his time at Harvard. "I was pretty libertarian and sort of Republican-leaning. Definitely in the political minority."

Despite this, he has gone on to become one of this country's leading advocates for marijuana legalization—hardly an issue with which many conservatives choose to ally themselves today. "I arrived at an interesting time at Harvard," he says now. "I didn't even know what marijuana was as freshman. It was dangerous, something that disreputable people used. There was no discussion of drugs at Harvard at back then."

After concentrating in math, Gieringer moved to the West Coast, which he found "more amenable to libertarian values." He earned a Ph.D. at Stanford in economics and public policy in 1984, but remembers the year he took off to serve as a congressional intern in Washington in 1975 and '76 as "a real education." Even then, he recalls, he had a knack for picking up on issues ahead of the times. "We did the first congressional report on climate change! We brought in all these experts, and at the time we thought there was going to be another ice age. But instead, all these scientists were talking about the greenhouse effect, which, if it were true, would be apparent in 20 years. That's the most accurate long-term weather forecast I've ever heard!"

Gieringer maintains that the subsequent 30-plus years he's spent in his job campaigning for medical marijuana in California would not have happened had it not been for his experiences on the Hill. "My involvement was really an evolutionary process," he explains. "I became distressed by the happenings around prescription drugs and consumer choice."

He decided to take a job directing a drug advocacy group called California NORML, part of the larger National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws. Of his decision to join, Gieringer says, "I figured the best time to get involved with anything is at the bottom, and there was nothing there on this issue at the time. This was 1987, and the whole drug-reform idea was in the pits, and there was a real vacuum of leadership."

With Gieringer at the helm, California NORML has be-



Dale Gieringer
speaking at a
NORML event

come the flagship group for medical marijuana advocacy and marijuana legalization. "Things got worse at first, and then we got involved with Dennis Peron [the figurehead for the pro-cannabis movement throughout the 1990s], who sponsored the San Francisco Medical Marijuana Initiative, and we started receiving calls from people who had medical needs, asking how they could get some."

For Gieringer, this was eye-opening. "I was approaching this issue from a personal freedom perspective. I had no idea marijuana was useful for so many conditions—I mean, epilepsy, spinal trauma, AIDS..."

The list went on, and the calls kept coming in. In 1994 he published a book on the economics of legalizing marijuana. He went on to help organize and write the 1996 initiative Proposition 215; its passage by voters legalized medical marijuana in the state. California NORML also conducted the first-ever sponsored study on alternatives to smoked marijuana. "Water pipes and vaporizers are now the gold standard for medical marijuana," he reports.

In 2004, he became a proponent for a local tax and regulation initiative in Oakland that eventually led to a discussion on legalizing marijuana in general. That discussion influenced assemblymen Tom Ammiano to introduce the first ever legalization bill, Proposition 19, in 2009. It was a proud moment for Gieringer, particularly because he saw the influence of his '94 book in the language of the legislation. "I never thought this language would see the light of day," he admits. "And got it out of committee!"

For his longtime dedication to the cause, Gieringer was invited to Amsterdam in late November to receive the "Freedom Fighter of the Year" award from *High Times* magazine. "It was a big year for marijuana," he says, laughing. "I usually spend Thanksgiving with my family. But I made an exception for this."

As for the future, he predicts a further uphill battle: "Prop. 19 most likely won't pass quite yet. Federal law has tried to pre-empt states on this, so it really has to be done on a national basis. I said I'd be happy to retire when marijuana is legal in California. But I'm going to be 65 in April, so I'll have to take a late retirement."

~MAYA E. SHWAYDER