

# THE WEED RUNNERS

A person in silhouette is carrying a large white tray filled with marijuana plants. The person is standing in a greenhouse, with rows of plants in black trays visible in the background. The lighting is dramatic, with the person's face and features obscured by shadow.

**Travels with the Outlaw Capitalists of  
America's Medical Marijuana Trade**

**NICHOLAS SCHOU**

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# Acknowledgments

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**Writing a book about the inner workings** of America's marijuana industry, where the lines between what is legal and what is not so legal are so blurry as to defy definition, is no easy task. By definition, however, the risks facing the subjects of such a manuscript are far greater than those faced by the writer. Therefore, I'd like to thank everyone who spoke to me for this book and who helped me with my coverage of the medical marijuana movement for *OC Weekly* over the past sixteen years.

Many of these sources appear in this book, although for obvious reasons and where clearly stated, I couldn't always use their real names. I'd also like to thank my editor and partner in crime at the *Weekly*, Gustavo Arellano, for his support of my efforts, as well as Voice Media Group for giving me permission to use previously published material from my years of work on this project. As always, thanks also to my literary agent, Jill Marsal, and to my wife, Claudia, for her guidance and support.

# Introduction

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**It might be a stretch to say that the history** of America's underground marijuana trade is encapsulated in the story of Donald Hoxter.

Not by much, though.

Few people can say they've smuggled as much as ten tons of marijuana across both the Mexican and Canadian borders per year. Or that they were one of the first hippies in the Pacific Northwest to pioneer America's homegrown crop in the early 1980s, some fifteen years before marijuana became legal, first in California, and then in more than a dozen other states, for medical purposes. And it's certainly true that few have won or lost as much as Hoxter in this business. His story, which ends before the tales contained in this book begin, is therefore a perfect place to start.

At the moment, Hoxter is sitting at an outdoor table at a coffee shop in Long Beach, California, at a busy intersection, kitty-corner from an elementary school where kids are loudly enjoying their afternoon recess. He's a tall, lanky man in his early sixties with whitening red hair and freckles. His fair skin is mottled red and white, permanently scorched by forty-one straight months in the too-sunny recreation yard of a federal prison. A fresh cigarette dangles from his lips. He's almost lit the thing several times over the past hour or so, but instead absentmindedly twirls the lighter with his left hand.

Hoxter is too busy talking to smoke. The memories, some of which are still a jumble in his mind since he hasn't spoken publicly about much of his life until now, overflow. It all started in the early 1960s, he says, when he was a kid in El Cajon, a gritty, working-class town just east of San Diego. Then as now, El Cajon was a bastion of the Hells Angels, and several members of the outlaw motorcycle gang happened to live on the street where Hoxter grew up. "They lived on the same block, much to my mother's chagrin," remembers Hoxter. "I got my first joint from the Hells Angels. They cost about four for a dollar back then. And of course they came from Mexico. Mexico is where everything came from in the beginning."

Hoxter hung out with older kids and young adults who tended to drive down to Tijuana each weekend. He didn't realize it right away, but a lot of them weren't just crossing the border to get drunk in the cantinas of the infamous Zona Norte. "A friend of mine came back one time, and was laughing and joking and opened up the trunk of his Chevrolet," he recalls. The friend lifted up some unfolded newspapers and proudly showed Hoxter several bricks of cheap Mexican grass. Even before Hoxter was old enough to drive, he was going along for the ride, and by the time he had his license, he was a smuggler. "It was nothing. You just drove down and drove back," he recalls. "Going into Mexico, there was no police presence, and coming back you just played it like you had gotten drunk because that's what people did."

Typically, Hoxter and his friends would find a back-alley dealer, pool their money, and purchase about two pounds of pot that had been packed into tight bundles, or bricks. Each one cost \$60 or \$70. Then they'd sell each pound for \$300, dividing the amount into thirty lids, or \$10 quantities, which were measured by a finger's width of a Prince Albert can of tobacco. By the late 1960s, he and his buddies were handling much larger loads, thirty or forty pounds at a time, which they'd typically stash in the bottom of a boat and then attach to their legs with rope before swimming ashore. Meanwhile, they'd formed their own commune in San Diego called "the Family," and had hooked up with the Brotherhood of Eternal Love, a group of hippies and surfers living in cheap houses in Laguna Beach wh

were smuggling untold quantities of hashish from Afghanistan and transporting massive quantities of Mexican weed across the border.

Smuggling and selling hash and marijuana became a way for the Family, the Brotherhood, and legions of other hippies to finance their alternative lifestyles. As more young people started tuning in, turning on, and dropping out, the demand for Mexican buds grew even higher, and Hoxter was often handling shipments of one thousand or one thousand five hundred pounds at a time. Because of the volume they handled, the various drug networks operating at the time soon had no use for Tijuana middlemen and had hooked up directly with individual villages in the Mexican states of Sinaloa, Jalisco, or Michoacan, where growing marijuana had long been a way of life. The Family patronized one particular hamlet high up in the hills of Michoacan, an hour or so south of Morelia. After a decade of cross-border enterprise, the jungle township had doubled in size and enjoyed electricity, plumbing, and paved roads.

When Southern California got too crowded—and too hot—Hoxter and the Family moved to rural Montana, and Hoxter began a new life smuggling Mexican loads across the border into Canada. His first crossing was insanely risky: he drove through a one-man border control checkpoint with his Canadian girlfriend, posing as newlyweds. “My chances were probably 80-20 that I’d get caught,” Hoxter estimates. “But I told her to look at this guy and melt him. I want him to think if I wasn’t sitting here, he’d had a shot with you.”

Hoxter’s girlfriend was a stunner, and the happy couple was soon in Vancouver unloading four hundred pounds of pot, which is how Hoxter met a friend of a friend nicknamed Art Nouveau, who became his partner in crime for the next twenty-five years. Thanks to his connections in Vancouver, a group of hippies who were the biggest pot dealers in British Columbia, Hoxter was never short of work when it came to smuggling weed. He spent most of the 1970s living off the grid at the Family’s commune in Montana, raising chickens and pigs and running pot across the border, one thousand pounds at a time. Every month a truck would come from Southern California, full of marijuana from Mexico. Hoxter had a collection of US Forestry Service topographical maps, and knew all the unused service roads that led to the Canadian border.

“On the maps, the roads ended at the border, but you knew they didn’t really end but went straight into Canada,” he explains. “All you had to do was choose one that would dump you out close to a paved road, because once you were on the pavement you could be anybody, even if you did have Montana plates, which was okay.” While driving through people’s farms on the way to the main road, Hoxter says nobody seemed to mind as long as he remembered to shut their gates so their cows wouldn’t wander off. Often Hoxter would drive close enough to a farmhouse to actually see a farmer and his wife sitting at their dinner table, making eye contact with him in that subtle country manner. Not once did he forget to close a gate, nor did he ever cross paths with the Canadian border patrol.

A growing stack of bills from each successful sojourn, stashed in a hole in the ground under one of the houses, funded the Family’s hardscrabble existence. If someone needed money to travel somewhere or buy groceries or supplies, Hoxter, who was known among members of the commune as “Controller,” would simply disburse the cash on a case-by-case basis, using larger amounts to finance ever-larger marijuana shipments that were always being orchestrated either via the Brotherhood or directly from Mexico. The biggest Mexican load Hoxter ever handled was a seaborne haul, three-tons of a five-ton deal, put together with his friends in the Brotherhood, who provided a yacht to transport the weed from Mexico. But the pot almost never reached its destination, because the yacht broke down.

“The price for losing that load was our lives,” Hoxter recalls, his voice suddenly catching in his throat.



“The Mexicans would have killed us if we lost it.” In fact, one of the crewmembers did lose his life, but that was before the boat broke its driveline. “One of the San Diego kids fell overboard on the trip north,” Hoxter says. “I don’t know how it happened. You’re out there in the deep blue; it was nighttime. The captain said, ‘We’re not turning around. Sorry, but your friend is gone.’”

Hoxter had no choice but to fly back north, inform his friend’s parents that their son had died in a sailing accident, and then raise \$33,000 to buy the spare parts for the boat, which sat useless in a Pacific Ocean port. Finally, he had to convince his girlfriend to let him strap her down with the cash, which he carefully wrapped around her torso after instructing her to look everyone in the eye and, when necessary, to flirt. Then he purchased airline tickets to fly her and her husband—yes, his girlfriend had a husband at this was the early 1970s after all—down to Mexico. The couple posed as newlyweds on honeymoon, and once they arrived in Mexico City, Hoxter’s contacts delivered the money to the port where the boat was waiting. After the cash arrived, the parts were purchased and the load miraculously arrived a few weeks later at an isolated beach on the US Marine Corps base in Camp Pendleton. The spot was accessible by a dirt road and guarded only by a chain-link gate secured with a padlock. Hoxter and his cohorts used inflatable motorized rafts to run the bundles of marijuana off the yacht onto the beach; the haul filled up two Winnebago motor homes which Hoxter purchased, cash down, just to transport the goods.

Because the trip had taken a few months longer than projected, Hoxter ended up owing the Brotherhood some money, and to pay them off, he had no choice but to make a one-thousand-pound run to Canada. Usually, that was no problem. However, now it was the dead of winter and fourteen feet of snow blanketed the border between Montana and Canada. The Forest Service had also blown up some of the decrepit bridges Hoxter had been using to run drugs, and had even constructed giant earthen berms along the roads to prevent all but the foolhardiest four-wheel-drivers from attempting passage. Hoxter’s solution, hitching trailers loaded with pot to a pair of snowmobiles, seemed to work until halfway up the mountain, when one of them busted a fan belt from the strain of carrying the heavy load.

He and his friend were able to weave the belt back together with some spare wire before they froze to death, but the mission was over. The next night, Hoxter waited until long after sunset and walked up to a border checkpoint that was only open during the daytime. He yelled and cursed at the top of his lungs and smashed a couple of bottles of tequila on the road. “Nobody came out,” he says. “So the next night I went up to the gate and cut the lock with bolt cutters at 3:00 A.M.” On cue, Hoxter’s friend, behind the wheel of a truck with the pot, roared through the checkpoint. An hour later, they unloaded the weed and were back through the border before anyone knew the gate’s lock had been broken.

In the early 1980s—Hoxter can’t remember the exact year—the Family commune in Montana began to fall apart under the strain of cabin fever and rapidly approaching middle age, and he and his wife moved to Lebanon, Oregon. There, they raised three daughters on a 2,500-acre property. They lived in a small trailer, but not because the property lacked proper shelter. In fact, Hoxter had purchased the land because it featured a large barn, which he had every intention of using for growing marijuana. Inside the barn, Hoxter wired together several one-thousand-watt metal-halide lamps, hanging them from the beams, and reflected the heat with Mylar sheeting in a ten-by-twelve-foot enclosure. When the female plants reached a certain height, he moved them to various locations he’d scouted in nearby national forest land where, if he could keep the herb stalks hidden long enough, he could harvest his cannabis crop before the feds ripped them from the soil.

This being the dawn of the homegrown American marijuana farming industry, Hoxter was hardly the only hippie in rural Oregon who had his own pot farm. There wasn’t much else to do. The logging

industry had been on the wane for years, and unemployment ran high in the small towns. “All I wanted to do was grow, although Canada was always my ace in the hole,” Hoxter says. “I knew that I could always make a lot of money smuggling a load. At first, I was the only person I knew growing indoors with lights. But then a friend of mine started growing, and he used sodium-vapor lights, which turned out to have a better light spectrum for growing, and this kind of information would get spread like that. There was even a local magazine for growers called *Sinsemilla Tips* that passed along word-of-mouth horticultural advice. “People were learning,” Hoxter says. “There were still no names for the product yet, none of the strains had been branded, and botanists were just starting to figure out how to crossbreed hybrids. It was all still just marijuana.”

Every night, the local television station would broadcast reports on how many plants the feds had spotted with their planes and seized in the forests that day. But Hoxter never was caught, and everything went just like he'd hoped, until his wife became ill and died in 1987. Thus began a downward spiral for Hoxter. Or rather, thus ended a downward spiral that had already begun well before his wife died, one which had been amplified by the highly illegal nature of everything he'd been doing for the past few decades. His career ended with him becoming mentally and physically isolated, alone with three daughters, unable to cope, strung out on heroin, and dealing harder drugs to support his habit. Just when things couldn't get any worse, the feds raided his farm.

After a stint in federal prison, Hoxter relocated to Southern California, where he went straight back into the marijuana business. But a cop in Laguna Beach who knew of his background as a smuggler got wind of his presence there and raided his house six times in ten months, until on the last raid, he caught Hoxter with a couple of pounds of weed, enough to charge him with possession with the intent to sell. Hoxter served the next forty-one months in federal lockup, and came out determined to put his criminal escapades behind him, although he reserved the right to smoke marijuana.

“I was on parole and had eighteen dirty tests in a row,” he explains. “My parole officer could have sent me back to prison, but she didn't, because I was working full-time, and for some reason, she liked me. “Fifty years ago you could go to prison for drinking beer and now you can do that legally,” Hoxter told her. “So was it wrong then?”

“I'm not going to argue with you,” the parole officer responded. “But it's against the law and you don't seem to get it.”

Except that marijuana wasn't illegal any more.

Not *exactly*, that is.

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Just weeks after the last time Hoxter was busted for marijuana, in November 1996, California voters overwhelmingly voted in favor of Proposition 215, which legalized marijuana for medical purposes under state law for the first time in American history. The law was written by a group of marijuana legalization activists in the Bay Area, most notably a San Francisco resident named Dennis Peron whose partner had used cannabis to treat the symptoms of his AIDS virus before he passed away from the disease. According to the new law, which became known as the Compassionate Use Act, if a doctor wrote a recommendation—not a prescription, since it remained illegal for doctors to prescribe—for marijuana, a patient could grow, possess, and smoke the substance with no fear of the law. In the wake of that vote, activists up and down the state began forming collectives to provide marijuana to members, openly announcing their intentions at city council meetings and in letters to politicians and police departments. They'd soon regret being so foolish. Two of the activists who jumped on the medical

marijuana bandwagon too fast and too soon were Martin Chavez and David Herrick. They were among the first victims of the statewide law enforcement crackdown that followed the passage of Prop. 215.

I followed both of their cases as a reporter for *OC Weekly*, Orange County's alternative newsweekly where I now work as a managing editor, and in 1999, the newsweekly nominated Chavez as "Man of the Year" in celebration of his efforts to provide medical marijuana to low-income patients—much to his own peril. Chavez grew up in the industrial, working-class barrio of Huntington Park, California. In 1972, when he was just seventeen, Chavez dropped out of high school. He begged his mother to sign paperwork allowing him to join the Marine Corps Reserve before his eighteenth birthday. She did, and Chavez served in the corps for the next six years. In his spare time, he worked construction jobs and ultimately went into business for himself as a small contractor. He married, fathered two children, and developed a bad habit: cocaine. In 1991, Chavez was convicted of possession and sent to Tehachapi state prison for two years.

Determined to get his life on track, Chavez participated in a work-furlough program. While being transported with several other inmates to a work site, Chavez suffered a back injury when the van he was in struck a parked Jeep. Chavez was transferred to the state prison in Chino, where he worked in the dining room. Mopping the floor one day in 1992, Chavez slipped and injured his back once again. Unable to walk or stand straight, he was finally given some pills and a back brace before being released from prison the next year. Free once again, Chavez found himself in constant pain. Worse, the medication he had been prescribed was turning him into a zombie. He didn't just feel no pain; he felt nothing at all and was incapable of even leaving the house. "The medication made me a hermit," he remembers. "I had mood swings. I didn't want to communicate with my sons. The side effects were too hard on me. I didn't want to be around people."

He went to a doctor who ran a blood test and made the startling discovery that Chavez was suffering from the onset of a genetically inherited spinal condition that can sometimes be triggered by back trauma. The disease, ankylosing spondylitis, inevitably fuses together the victim's bones until complete paralysis takes over. It's a process that is as excruciatingly painful as it sounds. From visits to a public library and through appointments with local doctors, Chavez learned that many in the medical community saw marijuana as a safer, healthier painkiller and appetite-inducer than several of the medications he was already taking.

After Proposition 215 became law, Chavez, who was then living in the Disneyland-adjacent suburb of Garden Grove, decided to set up a nonprofit cannabis co-op, the Orange County Cannabis Patient Doctor-Nurse Support Group. His goal was to make marijuana available to sick people on fixed incomes who were unable to grow it themselves. If Chavez was a drug dealer, he was an inept one. In late 1997, just weeks after Prop. 215's passage, he spoke with Garden Grove city officials, announcing his intention to open the co-op. He pleaded fruitlessly with the city elders for permission to set up an office somewhere in the city and wrote letters to then-Orange County Sheriff Brad Gates expressing his hope that the county's law enforcement folks would work with him to ensure that the co-op would remain on the good side of the law. He religiously advertised his efforts in the local media, expanding on his vision with any reporter who would listen.

The press interviews, the city hall speechifying, the letters: it was an odd campaign for someone allegedly trying to run a criminal drug operation. But that's exactly what authorities said Chavez and his friend David Herrick, a former San Bernardino County sheriff's deputy, were trying to do when they arrested Chavez in January 1998. Police had already arrested Herrick at a hotel room a few months earlier, confiscating several sandwich-sized bags of marijuana marked NOT FOR SALE, FOR MEDICAL USE

ONLY. The cops also found a database of the club's membership, which led them to two members: one who suffered from chronic back pain and another carrying a card identifying him as the caregiver for a lung cancer patient who was the ultimate recipient of the marijuana.

The prosecutor who tried Herrick in court for four counts of selling marijuana was Carl Armbrust, an octogenarian Eliot Ness who'd been with the DA's office so long that he'd helped take down the Brotherhood of Eternal Love when it fell victim to an Orange County grand jury investigation and a multi-agency drug task force back in 1972. Armbrust's dislike for marijuana hadn't softened just because of some silly vote by the people of California. As far as he was concerned, marijuana was still illegal under federal law and people like Herrick and Chavez were just dope dealers. When I asked him whether or not he disputed the medicinal qualities of marijuana as far as treating pain, Armbrust chuckled. "Sure marijuana makes you feel great," he answered. "So does drinking a glass of scotch. That's why they call it getting high."

Armbrust sent Chavez a subpoena to appear at Herrick's trial; the two shook each other's hands, and then a few days later, investigators working for Armbrust busted Chavez for providing marijuana to an undercover officer posing as a sick patient. Chavez wound up in state prison for more than a year. Meanwhile, in Herrick's trial, the courtroom proceedings at time resembled a scene from *Alice in Wonderland*. During one particularly weird moment, Armbrust became visibly upset when one of Herrick's medical marijuana customers failed to answer a subpoena demanding he appear in court to testify against Herrick. Suspecting the customer had friends in the courtroom, he threatened to have the would-be witness arrested but withdrew the threat when he learned the man was bedridden at a hospice, dying a slow and painful death.

Not once during his trial was Herrick allowed to mention the words "medical marijuana." Nor was he able to tell the jury how he first discovered its benefits in Vietnam circa 1969, when he was a combat medic assigned to the First Air Cavalry Division in the Central Highlands. Herrick volunteered for duty through the buddy system; his best friend worked on a medevac chopper and died six months after arriving in country. Herrick survived numerous fire-fights with the North Vietnamese Army, many of them bloody battles over remote hilltops that the Americans abandoned as soon as they captured them.

"Guys were dying, losing legs, and everyone was getting hooked on heroin," Herrick later told me. "The junkies in my company would raid my morphine whenever they couldn't get their heroin. No matter where I put it, in my aid bag or in the front pocket of my fatigues or even if I tried to bury it at the bottom of the rucksack—it'd always end up gone." About a month into Herrick's tour, his company was patrolling a rubber plantation outside Tay Ninh when it took small-arms fire from a band of Viet Cong. A soldier standing next to Herrick, who'd just arrived four days ago, took a bullet in the shoulder and fell to the ground.

"This kid was eighteen years old and scared shitless," Herrick recalled. "He was sobbing like a banshee. I had no morphine. So I went over to a guy I knew who had just scored and grabbed two joints and gave them to the kid. He fired one up." Herrick busied himself treating other wounded soldiers. Five minutes later, he checked back in on the kid. "He was lying against a tree," Herrick said, "joking like it was no big thing."

From then on, whenever he could, Herrick would medicate wounded soldiers with marijuana, a habit that won him a shouting match with his commanding officer, who felt the drug would render his soldiers useless and worried the smell would attract the enemy. Herrick argued that a wounded infantryman who was screaming his lungs out posed a worse problem than a stoned grunt who shut up and stayed out of the way. The two men locked horns for twenty minutes before his commanding officer

backed down.

Herrick made a particularly unlikely target for the likes of Armbrust. After returning from the war decorated hero, Herrick became a San Bernardino County Sheriff's Deputy, which is how he became a medical marijuana patient. In 1991, after fifteen years on the job, Herrick's patrol car ran over him while he was getting out of the driver's seat during a routine traffic stop. "As I was getting out of the car, it shifted from park to reverse, caught my leg, and pulled me under," Herrick explained. "It took out my disc and herniated it so bad that it was irreparable."

After three months in bed, where he was prescribed a regimen of Vicodin, Percodan, and codeine, Herrick realized he was addicted to the medications. His doctor told him that if it were legal for him to do so, he'd gladly write him a pain-relief prescription for cannabis. Herrick tried it and was sold; he eventually helped gather signatures in support of Prop. 215, which is how he befriended and ultimately went into business with Chavez.

For his crimes, Herrick went to prison for twenty-nine months, until the California Court of Appeals ruled that Armbrust had committed prosecutorial misconduct by misleading the jury about the evidence against Herrick during his closing remarks.

"Do you want to know why I did twenty-nine months in prison?" Herrick asked me, not long after his release. "For furnishing three-quarters of an ounce of marijuana to a man who had a doctor's written recommendation and was dying of terminal lung cancer."

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Flash forward fifteen years to the summer of 2011, which is starting to look a lot like the historical high water mark of the medical marijuana movement, although few realized it at the time. Besides California, fifteen other states—Arizona, Alaska, Montana, Colorado, and Nevada among them—as well as the District of Columbia have passed laws legalizing medical marijuana. Cannabis is California's biggest cash crop, with an annual harvest valued at about \$14 billion. With an estimated annual yield of 8.6 million pounds, it represents by far the largest share of the national cannabis crop, which itself is valued at \$3 billion.

It's estimated that as much as \$1.4 billion worth of cannabis is sold each year in California. Because state law views medical marijuana as a medicine, some dispensaries have gone to court to avoid paying sales tax, arguing that cannabis should be exempt from it like any other prescribed medicine. However, as of 2011, the California State Board of Equalization estimated that it was taking in between \$50 million and \$105 million a year in taxes on cannabis sales. In 2010, the city of Oakland, with its forty mega-dispensaries, including the world-famous Oaksterdam University—founded by the wheelchair-bound, bespectacled ex-roadie Richard Lee and which has its own nursery and has provided cultivation classes to thousands of activists—and Stephen DeAngelo's Harborside Health Center—the subject of the Discovery Channel reality show *Weed Wars*, which aired in 2011—collected \$1 million in tax revenue.

Starting in the mid-2000s, meanwhile, hundreds of medical cannabis dispensaries had opened up throughout the state, mostly in densely populated urban neighborhoods of cities such as San Francisco and Los Angeles, spreading from there to the suburbs. For as little as fifty dollars, a California resident could drop by a doctor's office—some of them conveniently located next-door to dispensaries—and obtain a written recommendation for marijuana. With that in hand you could walk into your dispensary of choice and after signing membership paperwork, you could select your "medicine" from row upon row of various strains of cannabis indica and sativa with sometimes exotic but more often recreational-sounding names such as Hindu Kush, Chem Dog, Luke Skywalker, Sweet Tooth, and Sour Diesel.

Meanwhile, local prosecutors in states that have legalized marijuana for medical use now refuse to file charges against anyone with a doctor's note as long as they aren't transporting or cultivating more weed than what is allowed under state law—usually half a dozen fully grown plants or up to eight ounces of dry marijuana. Knowing this, assuming the person has a valid doctor's note, it's likely the police won't even confiscate the cannabis in question. It's now just an infraction—the legal equivalent of a parking ticket—to possess an ounce or less of the stuff—and that's assuming you're the rare recreational pot smoker who's too lazy to get a doctor's note. Oaksterdam's Lee even paid \$1.5 million to sponsor a law, Prop. 19, that would have legalized the recreational use of marijuana for adults, but it failed at the polls in November 2010.

Since the first anti-cannabis law was enacted by the Massachusetts state legislature on April 29, 1917, pot smokers have blossomed from a handful of jazz musicians to tens of millions of people. Some twenty million Americans have been arrested on marijuana charges so far, and forty thousand people remain behind bars for marijuana-related crimes. And just as marijuana seemed poised to become completely legal in California, thus providing possible impetus to a nationwide campaign of decriminalization, everything changed. In October 2011, the federal government began a massive crackdown on California's medical marijuana industry, raiding dispensaries up and down the coast, seizing property from landlords who were renting to people growing or distributing pot, and hitting DeAngelo Harborside—the nation's largest dispensary with more than ninety thousand members—with a \$2 million tax bill, while also pressuring the dispensary's landlord to evict. Oaksterdam was next. On April 2, 2012, federal drug agents backed by local police raided the university in downtown Oakland, as well as Lee's house, and seized his entire nursery; Lee announced a few days later that he was giving up the medical marijuana business.

The raids continued throughout 2012, with particular intensity in places where local officials had grown fed up with large numbers of dispensaries, like Los Angeles, Orange County, and especially Long Beach, which as this book will reveal, engaged in a mercurial experiment with medical marijuana that will likely remain unrivaled in its hypocrisy in the annals of drug policy. Within the space of two years the city invited cannabis clubs to pay tens of thousands of dollars to apply to win city approval, wrote an elaborate city ordinance mandating the cultivation of marijuana within city limits, engaged in a suspicious and sloppy lottery process to award clubs that had met the criteria, and then refused to provide any club with a permit. Meanwhile, the city frequently raided the clubs that had smartly avoided the lottery fiasco. Lawsuits by cannabis patients and dispensaries against the city were filed as a result; taken together they could bankrupt Long Beach.

By the eve of the US Presidential Election in November 2012, it seemed official: the medical marijuana movement had reached its apex. The movement had failed. The industry that had boomed in the past three years was doomed to decline. And then on Election Day, voters in Washington State and Colorado passed state laws legalizing marijuana for recreational use, something that had been attempted more than once in California, most recently in 2009, but which had never won at the polls. A cover story in *Newsweek* magazine just weeks before the Colorado measure passed shed light on the corporate backers of the legalization measure, dubbing them America's new "pot barons." Just as the federal government's successful takedown of California's dispensaries showed the abject failure of medical marijuana to protect both the crop and the people growing it, American democracy had stepped in and provided new hope for stoners.

This book is about a relatively brief time but amazing period in American social history—an incredibly dynamic three years from 2009 to 2012 during which something unprecedented happened.

marijuana left the underground world of illegality and blossomed into a mainstream industry, becoming the fastest-growing economic engine in California before the feds swooped in and put pot back in its “proper” place.

The weed runners who inhabit this book are pioneers of the future American pot economy, whatever form it ultimately takes. Some of them are martyrs who paved the way for the explosion of medical marijuana. They lost their liberty by trying to accomplish too much too soon. Others followed in their footsteps, some more cautiously than others, risking everything including their own freedom to push the limits of this grand experiment.

As the book reveals, some weed runners have better intentions than others, and the well-intentioned ones ironically have tended to suffer worse fates at the hands of the law for their efforts. Some are smarter and just luckier than others, too. Generally speaking, these outlaw capitalists are the weed runners who have decidedly remained in the underground pot economy, or at least kept part of their portfolio firmly rooted in America's illicit pot trade. They view themselves as the next Jamesons and Johnnie Walkers. They are modern-day bootleggers who have helped lay the nationwide foundation for the brand-name marijuana of today and tomorrow. For them, the medical marijuana industry, and the war to curtail it, is just a sideshow. They know that until full legalization occurs, the real profits from pot will come from one source: smuggling weed across the country the good old-fashioned way. Regardless of the debate over medical marijuana, and certainly without regard for the law, they will be meeting America's incessant demand for weed one high-risk shipment at a time.

## **Yoga Girl has just woken up from a nap.**

The smile on her face suggests it's postcoital. Slender and pale with an upturned nose, she has long, curly hair swept over her shoulder. She wears a pair of tight yoga-style gray sweatpants and an indigo-colored top. Her boyfriend, who is shirtless with black slacks, is a handsome, tanned teenager with slicked-back blond mane and an uncanny resemblance to Leonardo DiCaprio.

Yoga Girl is a college freshman from Los Angeles who grew up in Newport Beach and has just moved back home for the summer, renting an apartment a few blocks from the beach. She's counting out twenty-dollar bills on a coffee table while her boyfriend stretches out on a futon.

"Here you go," she says. "That's my ID card. Do you have change for \$200?"

Standing next to the coffee table is someone I've known for years who prefers, for the purposes of this book, to be identified only as "Racer X."

He's a short, wiry surfer with a crew cut, tattoos on his arms, and a briefcase full of manila envelopes, each of which contains from one to six airtight, plastic containers full of medical marijuana. The girl has just shown him her State of California Medical Marijuana Identification Card (she'd read her ID number to Racer X's boss over the phone an hour or so earlier), and Racer X has just handed her an envelope containing a quarter-ounce of pot, half of which is Lavender Kush—at seventy-five dollars per eighth, one of the luxury strains available to medical marijuana smokers—and half of which is Northern Kush, which is also seventy-five dollars per eighth-ounce.

Racer X is a part-time driver for one of some two dozen cannabis clubs in Orange County that offer members door-to-door marijuana delivery services. His day job involves stocking groceries at a local supermarket chain. He's been a recreational marijuana smoker for years, typically toking up early in the morning before hitting the waves on his days off or in the evenings after work. He bought his pot from a dealer and fellow surfer whom we'll call "the Big Kahuna."

For years, the Big Kahuna had made a decent living selling pot to customers such as Racer X. But as his client base aged, got married, had kids, and smoked less weed, he began to worry about finding a replacement job. It didn't help that hundreds of marijuana dispensaries had since opened their doors in Los Angeles, offering high-quality marijuana to anyone with a doctor's note. After the Orange County Board of Supervisors, following several similar votes by their colleagues elsewhere around the state, voted in June 2007 to allow county residents to apply for state medical-marijuana ID cards, the Big Kahuna formed a legally registered nonprofit cooperative that would supply medical marijuana to members of the "club." He attended classes held by the California branch of the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws (better known by its acronym, NORML) and learned how to operate within the somewhat fuzzy boundaries established in state law for the operation of such collectives.

The Big Kahuna created a website for his club—the name of which he asked not to be revealed—and advertised on various marijuana websites, such as [www.weedmaps.com](http://www.weedmaps.com) and [www.weedtracker.com](http://www.weedtracker.com). Yoga Girl found the club through one of the two sites.

"I think it was Weedmaps," she says.



“We just looked for the closest one in our ZIP code,” her boyfriend chimes in.

“Yeah, that’s how we found you,” says Yoga Girl, who adds that she discovered Weedmaps through her sorority sisters in Los Angeles. There was a cannabis dispensary conveniently located down the street from her dormitory. “Now that I’m down here for the summer, I didn’t want to drive up to L.A.,” she says. “For safety reasons, too. If you have enough money for a card, having it delivered to you is definitely the way to go. You know, why not?”

I ask her what symptom she has that allows her to smoke marijuana. Yoga Girl pauses for a moment. “Uh, migraines?” she finally ventures. “I use it as a, um, sleep aid. Yeah.”

“Does it work?” I ask.

“Oh, yeah; yeah, it does,” she says, giggling.

Racer X laughs with delight as he zips up his briefcase and nods at the door. He’s in a rush to make it to his next delivery on schedule.

“Oh, yeah,” Racer X exclaims, waving good-bye to Yoga Girl. “Weed works, baby!”

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An hour earlier on this breezy summer day in 2009, I’m sitting with Racer X and the Big Kahuna in a small room inside a two-bedroom house in Newport Beach. It’s the Big Kahuna’s home office and headquarters of his six-year-old cannabis club, which he opened up to new members in November 2003. An American flag hangs on the wall, and stacks of large, airtight plastic bins fill one of the room’s corners, all of them stuffed with one of nineteen strains of marijuana with gloriously hyperbolic handles and descriptions such as Skywalker (a “tractor beam to Super Spacey!”) and Sour Diesel (“Good luck shutting up; Ramble alert!”). Two computers, one of which is cranking alternative rock via Pandora, a free online music station, take up a wraparound desk in another corner of the room. Several open containers of marijuana lay on the few available flat surfaces.

As usual, the Big Kahuna is sitting shirtless in his chair, flexing his large forearms around a giant glass bong. He takes a deep hit from the device and exhales powerfully into a one-inch-thick plastic tube that he has rigged to a spot in the wall near an air-conditioning unit. “That stuff can go outside,” he explains, nodding at the smoke. “I don’t care. It’s legal.”

Just then, his cell phone rings. The Big Kahuna spends the next twenty minutes explaining the various benefits of different strains of marijuana to a repeat customer who agrees to buy a quarter-ounce of a sativa strain. “There are two major groups of cannabis: indica and sativa,” he tells me after hanging up. “Most of the weed coming into California and being grown in California in the past twenty years was indica because people wanted to get stoned and sit on the couch. But if you give that indica to patients who are in pain, in misery, already in a bad place, it takes them down and makes them depressed and suicidal. Sativa is an upper, like coffee. It kills the pain and leaves the patient awake and aware and motivated instead of mellow.”

The person who just called has ordered a few eighths of a sativa strain, the Big Kahuna explains. “This guy has a metal rod inserted in his back, and it’s fused to his spine. He’s been on painkillers for ten years and is trying to get off them. He’s a regular customer. This is his third or fourth time. He orders from us every couple of weeks.”

A former pot dealer who spent time in jail after being set up by a large-scale pot mover who turned out to be an informant for the local police department of this affluent coastal suburban town, the Big Kahuna is an expert in what is legal and what is not so legal when it comes to medical marijuana. He

determined to stay on the legal side of things—unlike, he asserts, the hundreds of L.A. cannabis dispensaries that have opened in the past several years, many of which have been subjected to raids by both state and federal law-enforcement authorities.

“These dispensaries offer everything,” he explains. “Food, drink, tinctures, concentrates like hashish and all that stuff isn’t outlined in the law.”

The law in question, State Bill 420, which was enacted in 2008 to regulate medical marijuana, only allows dispensaries and clubs to grow and provide to their members dried cannabis. For that reason, the Big Kahuna tells me, he can only obtain marijuana from members of his club, all of whom must live in Orange County. He can’t buy pot from growers, say, in Los Angeles or Northern California. He can only deliver the locally grown pot to as many members of the club who live in Orange County as he wishes, as long as he has each member sign a form designating him as their primary caregiver. According to the California NORML, there are nearly 150 delivery services throughout the state, most of them in the Bay Area and Los Angeles.

The Big Kahuna tells me that the big L.A. dispensaries are also delivering marijuana to customers in Orange County, despite SB420 stating that designated caregivers can’t cross county lines. “It’s the Wild West up in L.A.,” he complains. “They are getting busted because they are bringing five pounds of weed in the back door and selling it out the front door, whereas we don’t do more than announce, which is what a [single] person could truly consume.” While the Big Kahuna acknowledges that half of his club members “just want to get high,” he says the other half is made up of legitimate patients.

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Racer X is driving a beat-up truck with a satellite-powered global-positioning device mounted on his dashboard. The GPS beeps every few seconds and provides a constant stream of directions. “Turn right, then turn left,” it might say, or “Now arriving at destination.” When Racer X misses a turn, usually because he’s too busy talking, the machine alerts him to his error with the word “Recalculating.” “That’s the last word I want to hear,” he says. That word means he’s getting lost and losing time, and time is money.

He delivers weed for the Big Kahuna three days a week, in shifts that last from 3:00 to 8:00 P.M. His busiest days are Fridays, when he can make as many as eight deliveries and earn up to \$200. For each eighth of an ounce he delivers, Racer X earns a \$10 commission. Sometimes, people tip him \$20. Once, a pretty girl ran after him with a twenty dollar bill that he’d mistakenly given her when counting out her change. “This is yours,” she said. “I was going to keep it, but you’re the last person I want to piss off.”

Today, Racer X is eager to stay on schedule because a few days earlier, he missed an entire shift—seven deliveries, a lot for a Wednesday—because the springs in his garage door broke and he couldn’t move his truck. He’s grateful that we reach the day’s first customer—the man with the metal rod in his back—in just a few minutes.

Unlike Yoga Girl, this customer isn’t willing to be interviewed on tape. He happily takes off his Hawaiian shirt to reveal a back brace, which he also removes. A nasty scar stretches from the nape of his neck to his tailbone; another traces a curve along the left side of his ribcage. He broke his back on the job several years ago and is trying to kick an Oxycontin addiction. He smokes marijuana to relieve the constant pain in his back. It relaxes him enough that he can play his guitar. He’s clearly lonely; for someone who doesn’t want to be interviewed, he has a lot to say. He follows Racer X all the way to his truck in the parking lot of the condominium complex and reluctantly waves good-bye.

Next, Racer X delivers half an ounce of weed to a weathered, middle-aged Latino man who is cooking

chicken in his Costa Mesa apartment and watching a Lakers game. “You guys want some food?” he asks but Racer X is eager to move on. He’s got one more delivery to make back in Newport Beach. Then his cell phone rings. It’s the Big Kahuna, telling Racer X that the last customer of the night is about to leave for dinner. Racer X can’t make it to the house in time, so the Big Kahuna agrees to make this delivery since he’s closer. “Next time, drop off at the houses that are close by first,” the Big Kahuna says. When Racer X tries to protest, the Big Kahuna cuts him short. “I’m the chief, and you’re the Indian,” he says. “Got it?”

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A week later, on another Friday afternoon, I join Racer X again. After meeting at the Big Kahuna’s house to pick up several manila envelopes for the first few deliveries of the shift, we drive to an apartment complex just five minutes away in Newport Beach. The only problem: the apartment is on a street that Racer X’s talking GPS device doesn’t recognize. It keeps telling him how to reach a street with a similar name. Ten confusing minutes and a few dozen screamed epithets later, Racer X finally finds the complex. He calls the customer’s telephone number three times, but nobody answers. Finally, Racer X realizes he was calling the wrong number.

After being buzzed in, we walk into the dimly lit apartment of a fat man watching Fox News. A diploma on the wall identifies him as a doctor of philosophy. He buys a quarter-ounce of weed. The next delivery is to someone who lives in Huntington Beach. Because Interstate 405 is jammed with traffic, we take surface streets, which turn out to be just as congested. (Racer X will later realize that with me in the car, we could have taken the carpool lane.)

At just after 5:00 P.M. on a Friday night—the worst time for rush-hour traffic in coastal Orange County—Racer X starts to lose his patience. Despite having medicated himself with marijuana earlier in the day, he’s exhibiting clear symptoms of road rage.

“Come on, dude!” he yells at a driver who fails to notice the traffic light change from red to green. “You don’t have to go home, but you can’t stay here!”

Finally, the driver begins to roll forward, and Racer X breathes a deep sigh of relief. “Sometimes, I feel like a taxi driver,” he says. “I’ve learned how to dodge around in traffic and avoid the really bad intersections so I don’t lose too much time. But I’ve also learned how to calm myself down while driving. I need to be able to do that because I’m driving around in a car full of something that is still considered a banned substance under federal law, and I don’t want to draw any more attention to myself than I need to.”

It’s clear that despite, or perhaps because of, the fact that Racer X medicates himself with copious amounts of marijuana on a daily basis, he’s a pretty paranoid individual. Driving around stoned with packages of weed in a suitcase in his backseat all day long, after all, isn’t exactly a risk-free activity, even if there are literally dozens of delivery services and hundreds of drivers just like Racer X doing that exact thing—except for maybe the driving-while-stoned part.

There’s always the possibility of being pulled over by the cops, who will not look kindly on all those eighth-ounce containers of marijuana—clear evidence, they could argue, that Racer X is in possession of pot with the intent to sell, a serious felony that could lead to months if not years in jail. Racer X’s proximity sense seems to escalate as we approach the city of Huntington Beach, which has more police cruisers prowling the streets per capita than anyplace else in his delivery area. His eyes continuously flick upward to his rearview mirror.

As we reach the neighborhood where the next customer lives, a strange slice of suburbia where all the

houses are built in a faux half-timber Tudor-era style, Racer X is busy explaining how he's learned to identify prostitutes. "You can tell that's what they are because they're always sitting at the bus stop, but they never get on a bus," he says.

"Sometimes, it really pisses me off," he continues. "Once I saw this Mexican lady with a kid sitting on the bench waiting for the bus, and four hours later, she was still there. I just don't get it."

Suddenly, Racer X's GPS device interrupts his rant. "Recalculating," it says. "Recalculating . . . Recalculating."

Racer X has missed his left turn. "You have got to be kidding me!" he shouts. "How the fuck do you make a U-turn?"

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At first glance, the Serial Killer looks like any other young Southern California skate punk, except he's wearing mirrored sunglasses inside his tiny, cramped apartment. The glasses, combined with his wool hat and leering smile, make him look like Richard Ramirez, the infamous Night Stalker. The only thing scarier than him is his dog, which is about twice his size. The animal looks like the kind of Belgian attack dog the South African police might have used to terrify anti-apartheid protesters at the height of the township rebellions; it's trying to push down a sliding patio door and eat Racer X.

This is Racer X's second delivery to the Serial Killer in just two weeks—that's when the Serial Killer moved to this unit—and he's already buying another five-eighths of an ounce of weed. Today the transaction takes less than a minute. "Thanks," the Serial Killer says. "I won't be here next time, just so you know. I'm moving." A few minutes later, Racer X gets a call from the Big Kahuna, who tells him that several more orders have just come in. "We're going to head back and do a pick-up-and-fly-by," Racer X tells me.

We drive back to the Big Kahuna's house. He walks out to the truck and hands over several manila envelopes. Seconds later, we're on our way to meet the next customer, a friendly but serious young man who lives in a surreal-looking neighborhood of Huntington Beach where all the houses resemble blow-up versions of structures you'd find at a miniature-golf course, minus the windmills. He says he works for a surgical-supply company and smokes medical marijuana to soothe his tension headaches, which he'd been diagnosed with as a teenager. He buys an eighth of an ounce of weed.

"I've had these headaches since high school," he says. "I've taken Tylenol and other over-the-counter drugs, but I really don't like them. I smoke this a couple of times a month," he adds, pointing at the just-purchased marijuana. "I mean, this will last me quite a long time, quite frankly."

The next customer is Racer X's favorite client. As we drive to meet her, he regales me with tales of her physical attributes. "She's, like, six-three, six-four, big-boned, and beautiful, like a Nordic Amazon warrior," he enthuses. "She says she has a boyfriend, but she's really friendly."

We pull up to the luxury condominium complex where the girl lives. A few minutes later, she bounces down the street and marches up to the truck with a happy grin on her face and leans in the driver's window.

"Hiya!" she says.

Racer X is in love.

The Nordic Amazon warrior, who is about a foot shorter and several dress sizes larger than Racer X had claimed, is really happy to see him. She freely acknowledges that her diagnosed medical condition—general anxiety—is just a ruse to get high without breaking the law. She explains that she grew up on the East

Coast and recounts horror stories about trying to find weed. "I remember the hunts we used to go on back home," she says. ~~"It would be hours and hours and twenty or thirty phone calls before you'd get lucky. Hmmm: yeah, anxiety,"~~ she adds, laughing at the memories. "Not anymore!"

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The final delivery of the day takes place in a parking lot near a Petco. For some reason, this customer always insists on meeting in that lot, something that troubles Racer X. "This guy kind of freaks me out," Racer X explains. "When I meet him, he's always bobbing his head around and making it look like a drug deal." A few moments after we pull into the lot, Racer X calls the customer, a tall middle-aged man in a tank top and shorts who is actually waiting just a few yards away. He walks up, putting his cell phone away.

"I can give you two hundred bucks if you don't mind, or would you rather I give you what I owe you?" the man asks nervously.

"Your total is \$140," Racer X says. "I can give you a fiver. Here you go."

The man laughs self-consciously as he puts the money in his wallet. He glances back and forth. "Ha, ha, ha," he says. "I'm getting used to this now."

We drive back to the Big Kahuna's house with \$520 in cash in Racer X's briefcase. Today, he estimates that the Big Kahuna has made \$1,000, and that, as a driver, he will receive \$200. As we navigate the rush-hour traffic on Harbor Boulevard for the third or fourth time that evening, Racer X reflects on his volunteer work with the club. "This is a really cool job," he says. "The first few times I went out, I was really nervous. You don't know if you're going to be meeting a cop or a cowboy who might decide he wants the weed for free and pulls a gat on you. But that's never happened yet."

Racer X's closest call happened in a parking lot when he made the mistake of getting out of his car to hand an envelope to a customer in return for a wad of cash. An alert security guard saw the exchange and pulled up to ask what was going on. "I told him it was a medical-supply delivery," Racer X says. "He couldn't see what was in the envelopes and didn't really know what was going on, so he didn't call the cops."

Even if the guard had done so, Racer X says he's confident that he'd be protected. "Legally, we're fine," he says. "There is no problem with what we are doing. If a cop were to pull up in the middle of a delivery, I have a paper saying the patient has designated the club as his caregiver. I might run into a problem, but I would just keep my fucking mouth shut and not say a goddamn thing and see what happens in the courts."

That anecdote reminds Racer X of a funny story he'd been meaning to tell me all day. "Remember that cute girl we delivered to last week?" he asks, referring to Yoga Girl. "Well, her mom got hold of her cell phone." According to Racer X, Yoga Girl's mom began dialing all the unfamiliar numbers on her daughter's phone, which eventually put her on the line with the Big Kahuna, who always answers the phone by stating the name of his cannabis collective.

"What are you?" the anxious mother asked the Big Kahuna.

"We're a club," he offered.

"Is my daughter in your club?" the woman asked, the alarm in her voice rising.

The Big Kahuna was about to hang up the telephone, but then thought better of it. After all, it wasn't like he was a drug dealer. Marijuana's legal now, he suddenly remembered, and he was the proud director of a legitimate nonprofit organization that happened to deliver medicine.

“Please answer my question,” pleaded the woman on the other end of the line.

“Yeah, you know what?” the Big Kahuna responded, his voice still friendly and professional as he hung up on her. “I don’t think I’m going to answer any more of your questions. You’re not part of the club.”

## 2 | The Big Kahuna's Club

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### **The balloon is almost as tall as Racer X.**

He unscrews it from the top of the Volcano-brand vaporizer, a stainless steel contraption that resembles the base of a blender. The vaporizer is perched on a bookshelf pushed up to one wall of the back room in the headquarters of the Big Kahuna's brand-new marijuana club. It has a dial set to well above 130 degrees, the temperature at which marijuana begins to release its medicinal THC into the atmosphere as a vapor.

It's just before 2:00 P.M. on this spring day in 2011, two years after my first ride-along with Racer X. He holds the balloon to his lips, his palms gently pressing at its sides. An invisible mist of vaporized marijuana forces its way deep into his lungs. He struggles to maintain his balance as he continues to inhale, his hands grasping the balloon much tighter now. He blows upward to the ceiling, coughing contentedly, then hands the balloon to his friend, who repeats the ritual.

On the couch behind Racer X are two knapsacks, both of which are partially unzipped. Clearly visible are a pair of large clear sacks that are bursting with marijuana that's already been divided into one-ounce quantities. The bags of marijuana have just been hand-delivered via courier from the Big Kahuna's nearby pot garden. By themselves, the two bags are worth thousands of dollars, but they represent just a tiny fraction of his harvest. The indoor grow house is at a secret location known only to the Big Kahuna and his partner, who's been providing the Big Kahuna with marijuana for about four years, ever since he was just a regular weed dealer. Now the two men have gone quasi-legitimate.

Their theater of operations is Costa Mesa, a sleepy Southern California city with just over one hundred thousand residents, a large number of whom are retired. It's sandwiched between Orange County's two socioeconomic extremes. To its south, on the coast, is the Republican yachting enclave of Newport Beach; to the north lies the working-class barrios of the county seat, Santa Ana, the majority whose population is Latino and which has the highest percentage of foreign-born Mexicans in the country. Costa Mesa's biggest source of income is tax revenue from half of a high-end shopping mall, South Coast Plaza—the other half is owned by Santa Ana. Costa Mesa's city council is a generally conservative bunch, although the mayor, Gary Monahan, owns a bar and is rumored to be friendly, in a libertarian sort of way, to the notion of medical marijuana. For now, at least, pot clubs are being tolerated by the city so long as neighbors don't complain, and providing they promise to grow their own medicine rather than buy it on the underground market. Thus, the Big Kahuna simply arranged an exclusive arrangement with his friend, the latest fruits of which are in the knapsacks, ready for Racer X and his buddy to break open and divvy into plastic containers for delivery or purchase at the dispensary.

Dividing medical marijuana into ounce, half-ounce, quarter-ounce, and eighth-ounce amounts is just one of Racer X's new responsibilities. He also spends at least two mornings each week trimming recently harvested marijuana plants of their outer leaves, which are then processed into highly potent powder, *kief*, as well as hashish, tinctures, and edible marijuana products. Savvy cannabis club operators like the Big Kahuna know they can more than double their revenues if they know how to properly trim the product.

Two years earlier, the club operated out of the Big Kahuna's rented, two-bedroom house. Now, he

owns his own place, and with a wife, a toddler, and an infant son living with him, he no longer works from home. Back then, the Big Kahuna answered most of the incoming delivery calls himself, and he had only a few hundred customers who were served by Racer X and two other part-time drivers. Now, in the back room of the Big Kahuna's headquarters, a fleet of operators lined up at telephones along one wall answer a steady stream of delivery requests.

"Are you more of an indica guy?" one of the operators asks. "Well, this one is great for pain, but it'll knock you out, so be ready, boss."

There's also a storefront dispensary that's open from noon to 8:00 P.M. seven days a week. The Big Kahuna estimates that he has roughly twenty-five hundred members and that more than one hundred people walk through the doors of his dispensary each day. Despite the convenience, door-to-door deliveries now account for only 20 percent of his business, which he estimates grosses at least \$75,000 per month. His is just one of roughly thirty dispensaries that have opened in this city in the past year, at the rate of one or two a month, with some dispensaries shuttering within a few months because of the stiff competition.

Racer X's main job is managing the storefront, which has a hip, tiki-style façade and looks at first blush like it might be a surfboard shop. There, he sits behind a desk and verifies incoming club members by checking to see that they are carrying a valid doctor's recommendation to smoke marijuana. He flirts with an attractive middle-aged blonde who's waiting for her verification. Racer X loves his new job much more than driving around in traffic, trying to find customers with a half-functioning GPS device. As soon as the storefront opened, in fact, he quit his day job at the grocery and began working the front office of Big Kahuna's dispensary. "He's working with customers full-time in the storefront, right where he belongs," the Big Kahuna explains. "It's a better place for him than out driving around doing deliveries. He's a people person, if you know what I mean."

Racer X is just one of thirty employees who work for the Big Kahuna, who recently obtained health insurance for his entire workforce. "Seventy-five thousand dollars in revenue sounds like a lot of cash," he says. "But I've got so much overhead. Plus, we're getting fined by the city's code-enforcement people at least twice a month, so that's another five thousand dollars off the top. Then there's advertising, legal fees, and lobbying expenses."

Still, the Big Kahuna has so much money leftover at the end of the month that he has to start giving away the weed. That's because, unlike Colorado, for example, which allows dispensaries to profit from weed sales, California state law requires cannabis clubs to operate as nonprofit corporations. Thus, frequent cannabis consumers in California know that the best time to purchase weed from a dispensary tends to be at the end of the month. "That's when we have to offer all these deals," the Big Kahuna says, "like buy one, get one free."

It being the end of the month, another phone rings and another operator picks up, answering in a cheerful voice by stating the name of the cannabis club. A few seconds later, another phone rings. Because the second operator is already on a call, a third employee takes picks up the receiver. "Can you hold, please?" he asks, before pushing a button to answer, yes, another call. "Yes, we deliver. One hour tops—once you're verified. Can you hold, please?"

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The headquarters of Big Kahuna's marijuana club is a white barn that he converted into a front lobby, rear living room, and loft. The building is located less than half a block from a freeway entrance, thus saving time for the delivery drivers in terms of swift commuter access. The proximity to a busy rush



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