



Stroup in the 70s at the start of his NORML work. HIGH TIMES PHOTO

INTERVIEW

KEITH STROUP

FOUNDER & LEGAL COUNSEL
NATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR
THE REFORM OF MARIJUANA LAWS

The year was 1970. The United States was entering its ninth year of armed involvement in the Vietnam War. Against this backdrop, 25-year-old Keith Stroup graduated from Georgetown University Law School – typically a cause for great celebration for a poor farm boy from a small town in Southern Illinois. But Stroup was still eligible for induction into military service for another two years, and he had run out of reasons to defer reporting for duty.

WITH NOWHERE else to turn, Stroup contacted the volunteer lawyers from the National Lawyers Guild (NLG) for advice regarding how to avoid being drafted, where Stroup and his lawyers identified the “critical skills deferment” as one such possible pathway.

Stroup was offered a job on the staff of a newly created Congressional commission called the National Commission on Product Safety, based on the ground-breaking consumer protection advocacy done by Ralph Nader. The purpose was to identify products that were dangerous to consumers and recommend legislation to protect them. His local draft board in Southern Illinois granted his deferment just two weeks before he was scheduled to report for active duty.

Once Stroup completed his two-year commitment with the Commission, he was too old to be drafted and was finally free to

imagine the future. For the last two years, Stroup had worked alongside the master consumer advocate, Ralph Nader. No one appointed him, but Nader advocated for the safety interests of the public. No one elected or hired him, but his skillful use of the media and willingness to take on large corporations made him a hero for public interest lawyers. In his book, “It’s NORML to Smoke Pot: The 40-year Fight for Marijuana Smoker’s Rights,” Stroup recalled that “Nader was the individual who first piqued my interest in starting a marijuana legalization lobby. He was an inspiring consumer advocate.”

It was March 1971 when Stroup and other board members first filed incorporation papers in the District of Columbia for a new marijuana consumer’s advocacy organization known as NORML. No one had previously attempted to build such a nationwide, grassroots, mari-

juana consumer’s lobby. Nevertheless, Stroup pushed forward after an encouraging meeting with former U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark. Later, it would be Clark who suggested that Stroup and NORML reach out to the Playboy Foundation for its initial financial support – a five-thousand dollar grant.

By 1978, NORML’s efforts were finally bearing fruit. Thanks to NORML’s legislative outreach efforts and former President Richard Nixon’s National Commission on Marijuana and Drug Abuse, better known as the Shafer Commission, 11 states rapidly enacted marijuana decriminalization measures in the mid to late 1970s. At the time, national polls indicated that nearly 30% of the public supported the idea of marijuana legalization. NORML was also enjoying an extraordinarily close relationship with the sitting administration of President Jimmy Carter – the first American



president to ever endorse the decriminalization of marijuana. All signals seemed poised for launch ... that’s when the bottom fell out.

In 1978, NORML and the Carter Administration began heated discussions over the Administration’s policy of spraying the deadly herbicide paraquat on the marijuana fields in the Sierra Madre region of Mexico. Stroup was strongly opposed to such action. To further fan the flames, the Washington Post broke a story about Dr. Peter Bourne – the President’s drug policy adviser – who wrote a prescription for quaaludes for his assistant under a false name while serving the Administration.

Ordinarily, this would be an internal matter for the White House. However, the Washington Post further reported that a year earlier, Bourne attended a private party hosted by NORML in a Dupont Circle home. At that party, Stroup reportedly greeted Bourne and escorted him upstairs into a private VIP room occupied by guests, which included Hunter S. Thompson, Tom Forçade, Christie Hefner, David Kennedy, John Walsh (Washington Post editor) and other luminaries. Needless to say, drugs were alleged to have been consumed.

When the story that Bourne was using drugs (including cocaine) at the NORML party came out, no one would corroborate the story. But despite his repeated denials, Stroup eventually let his anger at the Administration and at Bourne get the best of him. When called for comment regarding Bourne’s drug usage at the party, Stroup uttered the now infamous denial-non-denial, which he still cringes from today. “I can neither confirm nor deny the story,” Stroup recalls telling the media. And with that one wry, off-the-cuff remark, he unraveled the good will and the work that he and the organization developed over the last 10 years. Even worse, he lost the trust of the organization that he had helped found.

“The Peter Bourne incident was clearly the low point of my time at NORML, in terms of undermining the good work we had done for the better part of a decade,” said Stroup.

“I assumed that when I left NORML in the early ‘80s, my tenure there was over for good. But I had to admit that I missed working on the issue that was most important to me. Nothing has been as personally and professionally rewarding to me as my time at NORML. Nothing.”

Stroup stepped aside as Executive Director of NORML after the Bourne incident became public news, but remained on the Board of Directors until 1982. From 1982 to 1994, Stroup had no affiliation with NORML and

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pursued public interest law as the Executive Director of the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers (NACDL), as well as other nonprofits. But when Dr. Lester Grinspoon re-organized the NORML Board in 1994, Stroup was the only original founder to be invited back to rejoin in 1982. He accepted, and within the year would return to the Executive Director position he occupied – serving until 2005, after which he assumed the role of Legal Counsel. Regarding his return to NORML, he noted, “I was glad to have a second chance.”

Looking forward, Stroup is very optimistic about the prospects for passage of marijuana legalization legislation. “I am of the belief that legalization is almost inevitable at this point, given the public levels of support. There are several polls, including Gallup, indicating that 68-70% of the country supports legalization, while between 88 and 90% support the medical use of marijuana. Because of a lot of hard work done for several decades, we have largely won the ‘hearts and minds’ of the American people – to use a well-worn phrase from the era.”

When asked about the biggest lessons from the early days, Stroup noted that while crowd size matters, access to power is more important. “Changing laws is only possible when you have access to power. I was generally looking for those chances as head of NORML.”

As a front-row witness to the history of Cannabis prohibition for more than 50 years, I asked Stroup what the final end-game looks like. The answer was a pragmatic one:

“Once most of the country is on your side, then the goal is simply overcoming the zealots on the other side of the issue who are preventing progress ... I am relatively certain, at this point, that there is no turning back. And we will win this issue fully and completely in every state within just a few years. Within five years, no one will be arrested for smoking marijuana in any state.” ✨



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MEDICAL CANNABIS LAW GROUP | MEDICALCANNABISLAWGROUP.COM | 301-251-9660 | 226 NORTH ADAMS ST. ROCKVILLE, MARYLAND

Since 2008, Mike Rothman has counseled clients regarding Cannabis laws and regulations as the founder and principal of the Medical Cannabis Law Group and the Law Office of Mike Rothman in Rockville, Maryland. Mr. Rothman has testified on Cannabis laws and regulations before the Maryland House of Delegates, taught classes, and lobbied the federal government on behalf of patients and businesses. Mr. Rothman’s Law Office focuses on criminal defense, including use of the medical Cannabis defense.