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Higher Learning

By Steven Gray / Southfield

This is what a medical-marijuana class looks like. Twenty-five or so students — men, women, young, middle-aged — listen attentively as an instructor holds up a leafy green plant and runs down the list of nutrients it needs. Nitrogen: stimulates leaf and stem growth. Magnesium: helps leaf structure. Phosphorous: aids in the germination of seeds. Michigan's Med Grow Cannabis College is one of several unaccredited schools to have sprung up in the 14 states and the District of Columbia that have legalized medical use of marijuana. Many of its students suffer from chronic pain. Others are looking to supply those in need of relief. ([See pictures of cannabis conventions.](#))

The Med Grow campus sits across the street from a KFC in Southfield, a relatively prosperous suburb of Detroit. Nearly one-fifth of its 90 or so students are former auto-industry workers. These recent enrollees — and the more than 1,000 people who have completed courses at Med Grow since it opened in September — are betting that studying such topics as bloom cycles and advanced pruning techniques will help them succeed in what may be one of the few growth industries in Michigan, home of the nation's highest unemployment rate: 14%. With medical marijuana fetching as much as \$500 for 1 oz. (28 g), providing it to a mere five patients could generate \$10,000 a month in sales.

Six-week courses at Med Grow cost \$475, and the school is planning to open campuses in Colorado and New Jersey within roughly the next year. Meanwhile, the nation's first marijuana school, the three-year-old Oaksterdam University, has expanded from Oakland, Calif., to locations in Los Angeles and one in Flint, Mich., and may open more. ([See TIME's photo-essay "The Great American Pot Smoke-Out."](#))

But as Med Grow founder Nick Tennant can attest, it's not easy being a leader of an emerging industry. Tennant, a very lean, very blond 24-year-old, grew up in the Detroit suburb of Warren and watched the auto-detailing business he started after high school founder along with the region's economy. Then, in 2008, a surprising majority of Michigan voters approved a measure to allow people with cancer, Crohn's disease, AIDS and other ailments to apply for state-issued cards to grow or obtain marijuana. He recalls thinking, "You could sit there and watch the industry evolve or step into the game."

So he wrote up a business plan for a marijuana-growers school and approached his car-detailing clients as potential investors. Many thought it was a joke, but enough took him seriously. He declines to say how much money he raised.

The next step was finding a landlord. One told him flatly, "I don't want to take on the risk." To which Tennant replied, "If you want to let your building sit vacant, go for it." He eventually settled on 5,000 sq. ft. (465 sq m) in an office building in Southfield, a half hour's drive north of downtown Detroit.

The first thing you notice when you walk into Med Grow is the pungent smell of marijuana. One of the school's two grow rooms showcases a single massive marijuana plant that, in terms of height and canopy, is about the size of a kitchen table.

[Watch TIME's video "An L.A. Medical Marijuana Odyssey."](#)

[See pictures of stoner cinema.](#)

Size matters, because Michigan limits the number of plants patients and caregivers may grow. Patients, more than 18,000 of whom have registered with the state since the law took effect in April 2009, may grow up to 12 marijuana plants. Caregivers — some 7,800 have registered so far — are restricted to a dozen plants for each of the five patients they're allowed to supply. But the law doesn't address where registrants can obtain plants or seeds. Nor does it address the issue of pharmacy-like dispensaries.

"This law is still brand-new, and it has a lot of gray areas," says James McCurtis, spokesman for Michigan's department of community health, which manages the state's medical-marijuana program. [\(See pictures of cannabis culture.\)](#)

Southfield's police chief, Joseph Thomas Jr., is keeping a close eye on Med Grow. His officers have let its students know that if they get caught with marijuana, then, as Thomas puts it, "we're going to drop you like a bad habit." Although he thinks the school has a right to exist, he uses this analogy: "You can teach people how to shoot a gun, but they can't go out and rob a bank with it."

Med Grow's curriculum includes classes on law, accounting and business development. But marketing yourself as a caregiver is tricky. Students are warned against telling acquaintances that they grow marijuana. Med Grow staffer Tom Schuster, 52, a former bank employee, provides a cautionary tale: a few weeks ago, someone ripped a hole in the wall of an apartment he managed and took \$15,000 worth of marijuana and \$5,000 worth of lamps and other growing equipment. "Stole my whole livelihood," he says of the incident, which he did not report to the police. [\(See more on TIME's Detroit blog.\)](#)

Fear of violent crime is one reason recreational use of marijuana is still illegal almost everywhere. And yet, ironically, the reason Detroit may follow Philadelphia's lead and liberalize restrictions on possession of small amounts of marijuana is to alleviate the strain on the local criminal-justice system.

In November, Californians will vote on a measure that would legalize marijuana for recreational use — and allow the drug to be taxed. Tom Ammiano, a Democratic assemblyman from San Francisco, estimates such a tax could generate up to \$2 billion in annual revenue for California. "When I speak about this issue, there's always a line of people with a business angle — an idea for a dispensary or a new grow light," he says. "We're a capitalistic society, and realistically, the tax will push people over the edge [to] realize, 'There's gold in them thar hills.'" And Nick Tennant will have his pickax at the ready.

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