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School of pot

Michigan college's curriculum centers on medicinal marijuana

By Peter Carlson
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Okay, before we delve into Med Grow Cannabis College and its myriad innovations in marijuana education, let's get all the dumb dope jokes out of the way:

Yes, Med Grow Cannabis College does give new meaning to the phrase "higher education."

No, Med Grow does not offer a seminar on "The Cinematic Art of Cheech and Chong." Nor does it serve Oreos and Doritos to students suffering from the munchies.

Go ahead and laugh at Med Grow, but the folks who run the school are totally serious about their pedagogical mission, which is to train participants in Michigan's newly legalized medical marijuana program in the finer points of growing and cooking killer weed.

"People assume it's a wild environment because of the stereotypes about marijuana," says Perry Belcher, who teaches the history of cannabis at Med Grow, "but it really is [a place of education](#)."

It certainly looks like one. Med Grow's classroom -- there's only one -- resembles any other college classroom, except for a banner advertising the "Cannabis Counsel," a Michigan defense attorney whose logo depicts the scales of justice balanced on a marijuana leaf. Right now, 16 students are sitting at wooden desks, jotting notes while Todd Alton delivers a lecture in his Horticulture 1010 class.

"You need to think of light as another kind of food," he says.

Alton presses a button and a slide flashes on the screen beside him: "The Spectrum of Light." He delivers a long, complex explanation about the different colors of light and how they affect the marijuana plant.

"In the early seedling stage, the plant really, really wants that blue light," he says. "In the flowering stage, it wants the other end of the spectrum. It wants the red light. It's extremely important to know which lights you need at which phase."

Alton, 36, has a botany degree from Northern Michigan University and plenty of hands-on experience growing pot, although he'd rather not get too specific about that part of his training. He's also a former chef, which comes in handy when he teaches his class on cooking with dope.

Now, Alton begins the lab portion of his class. He unlocks two heavy padlocks and swings two doors open, revealing a pair of blazingly bright rooms containing 10 marijuana plants. This is Med Grow's on-campus pot farm, and the students squeeze in to get a closer look. Alton points out a device that propels a powerful light back and forth over a couple of lush plants.

"This is a light-mover," he says. "It's not very expensive and it makes sure that light gets to every part of your plant."

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He kneels down and points to the strings that hold the plant's branches in a near-horizontal position. "If you get down and look from underneath," he says, "you see that we're exposing more buds to the light."

Two students get on their knees and gaze up, their eyes ablaze with a passionate love of learning. Or a passionate love of something.

Economics 101

Nick Tennant may be the only college president in America whose office contains an aquarium decorated with a High Times magazine pinup of a marijuana plant. He may also be the only college president in America who founded his school because the recession was killing his auto-detailing business.

"As the economy started drifting down, my business started contracting," Tennant says. "I knew I wanted to get into an industry that was limitless, that was poised for growth."

That industry was medical marijuana.

In November 2008, Michigan voters passed a referendum legalizing medical marijuana by a landslide margin of 63 percent to 37 percent, making Michigan one of 13 states to permit medical marijuana. Now, a Michigan resident can become a state-certified marijuana patient if a doctor declares that pot might alleviate his or her suffering from diseases ranging from cancer to "chronic pain." Patients are permitted to possess up to 2 1/2 ounces of marijuana and 12 pot plants. And they are permitted to buy the weed from their official "caregiver" -- also state-certified -- who can legally grow marijuana for up to five patients. Thus far, the state has certified 5,463 patients and 2,247 caregivers.

When the referendum passed, Tennant filed his paperwork to become a marijuana patient -- he suffers from "chronic nausea," he says -- then he and friends pondered how to use the new law to make money.

"We said, 'How can we help people and create a viable business model?' " he recalls. "And we came up with this business."

So Tennant sold his auto-detailing operation and founded Med Grow Cannabis College, advertising for professors on medical marijuana Web sites. At 24, he doesn't look like a college president. With his blond hair, boyish face and apple cheeks, he could star in a remake of "Dennis the Menace." He touts the weed as a way to jump-start Michigan's battered economy, which has left the state with America's highest unemployment rate, 15.1 percent.

"This is a multibillion-dollar industry that can create a very viable means of economic recovery for the state," Tennant says.

It seems unlikely that Michigan can float to prosperity on a cloud of marijuana smoke. But in a state where last year's illicit dope dealer can become this year's state-certified "caregiver," many residents are eager to earn a piece of the estimated \$13 billion Americans spend on marijuana every year.

"Anybody that's out of work, here's an industry that's welcoming you with open arms," says Tennant. "It's an industry that we're proudly training people for."

Med Grow isn't America's first marijuana college. That honor goes to Oaksterdam University, founded in 2007. Since then, 5,000 students have studied at Oaksterdam's three campuses in California, a state where 300,000 patients can legally buy pot from 700 dispensaries.

This year Oaksterdam sponsored two weekend seminars in Michigan, but Tennant says he's not worried about the competition. "I like to think we offer more hands-on learning than they do," he says.

Med Grow opened Sept. 14. Students pay \$475 for a six-week night-school course that includes classes in marijuana history, marijuana law, the basics of business and, of course, several courses in how to grow and cook marijuana -- one taught by an anonymous professor who goes by the name "Nature." Two groups, each comprising 20 students, have graduated, and several other groups are on their way.

"The students are a mixed bag," says attorney Paul Youngs, who teaches Med Grow's law class. "We have patients who want to grow for themselves. We have people who want to be caregivers and who approach it as a business opportunity. We even had a priest who works with AIDS patients. It's a mix of races and a mix of ages from the 20s to the 60s. And I believe some of the students are not even users."

"It's pretty awesome," says Roger McDaniel, 53, who is, along with his wife, a proud member of Med Grow's first graduating class. "It's all hands-on and all the instructors are very patient. If you've got questions, they'll answer them."

McDaniel is a carpenter with a long white beard and a Christ tattoo that bears the caption "Got Jesus?" Since injuring his back in a motorcycle accident, he suffers from chronic pain and now is a state-certified marijuana patient who swears the weed works better than his pain pills.

He plans to take Med Grow's advanced horticulture class next year, but he might not get the chance. After Med Grow applied for state accreditation this fall, some Michigan bureaucrats began to wonder: Is it legal to operate a trade school to train marijuana growers?

"We have to look into the legality of it," says James McCurtis, spokesman for the Michigan Department of Community Health, which administers the medical marijuana program. "In early December, our department, along with the Department of Energy, Labor and Economic Growth and the state attorney general's office, are going to meet to discuss the legality of operating a facility to teach people to grow marijuana."

Tennant says he isn't worried: "We're operating in accordance with state law."

Upper, upperclassmen

"Basically, we're just grandmothers," says Judith Booker.

She's sitting with her friend Jacquelyn White, waiting for class. Each has a notebook and the school's official textbook, which is a classic work by Cervantes -- "Marijuana Horticulture" by Jorge Cervantes. They are retired social workers who remain active in a Detroit community group.

"We're here to get information that we can share with our group about how to grow it," says White, 58. "In the metro Detroit area, we have a disproportionate number of HIV and hepatitis patients. They need to know how they can use this for palliative care."

"It's an up-and-coming industry," says Booker, 65. "I've been trying to push young people to get into an industry -- any industry but the car industry."

Professor Belcher begins his class with a slide announcing his course's title: "The History of Cannabis 1010." That history is long, Belcher says, but he'll try to cover it quickly. "I don't want to hold up the horticulture class," he says. "That's why everybody is here."

Belcher announces that he is a certified marijuana patient. "If I fly from Flint to Detroit with my medical marijuana, can I get arrested?" he wonders aloud. "I'd like to know that."

"You can't even take tweezers or scissors on a plane," a student calls out.

"Yeah," says another student, "but you're not going to hijack a plane with a joint."

Belcher laughs. "I can just see it: 'Okay, pilot, take on this!'"

The professor, who also works as a cameraman for televised wrestling matches, illustrates his lecture with scores of slides. The first show anti-pot movie posters: "Reefer Madness" and "Marihuana: Assassin of Youth!" Then comes a slide that asks, "Who Uses Cannabis?" It's followed by a long list of alleged pot-smokers, from George Washington and Queen Victoria to Hulk Hogan, Michael Phelps, Barack Obama and [Pink Floyd](#).

"Pink Floyd -- they sold what? 100 million records?" says Belcher. "Marijuana didn't hurt them at all. My favorite band, by the way."

Belcher traces the history from 6000 B.C., when the Chinese began to use it as medicine, he says, to October 2009, when the U.S. Department of Justice announced that it would no longer prosecute medical marijuana users obeying state laws.

Along the way, one of Belcher's slides shows an aerial photograph of a big city surrounded by suburbs. The slide is labeled: "Suburbia And The City."

"In this picture," Belcher says, "how many people do you think are smoking marijuana?"

Jacquelyn White smiles, shakes her head and whispers to Booker: "He misspelled 'suburbia.'"

Graduation day

A familiar smell pervades the air outside the nondescript suburban office building that houses Med Grow. What is that?

It's not pot. It's the aroma of Kentucky Fried Chicken wafting from the strip mall across the street, which also houses other staples of America's postindustrial economy -- a tanning salon, a waxing salon and a nail salon.

Outside Med Grow, Ted Mobley leans against his red pickup and finishes his last cigarette before his last night of class. Tonight he will graduate from Med Grow Cannabis College.

"I believe in the healing properties of marijuana," he says. He's 50, a laid-off machinist with hair down to his shoulders. He's also an official marijuana patient, using the weed to treat his glaucoma and high blood pressure. "I've pretty much destroyed myself over the last 50 years," he says, "and this helps me cope."

In class, he sits at a desk behind a woman who says her name is Chocolate.

Chocolate?

"Don't I look like chocolate?" she asks, smiling.

She says she's a retired insurance salesperson "closing in on 60." She shows Mobley the manuscript for her forthcoming self-published marijuana cookbook, titled "Chocolate's Infusion." It contains recipes for pickled mushrooms, macaroni and cheese, and something called "Hash Hash."

But there's no time to discuss cannabis cuisine right now because Alton is beginning the final class.

He discourses about the proper pH of soil used to grow marijuana, and the proper temperature of soil used to grow marijuana, and the proper manure to add to that soil -- cow manure, bad; earthworm manure, good.

Finally, he displays the final slide -- a slide that seems to contradict all the complexity that has preceded it: "Remember -- It's Just a Weed."

Now, Tennant walks to the front of the room holding a stack of diplomas, each embossed with a glittering faux-gold seal, each proclaiming the recipient to be a "Certified Caregiver" who is "entitled to all rights and privileges appertaining to that degree."

"All right, guys," Tennant says, "you've finished your six weeks and I hope you've learned a lot. If you need any information, you can always contact us. Now, without further ado, I'm going to give out the certificates."

He looks down at the first diploma. "Ted," he says.

Mobley shuffles forward. Tennant shakes his hand. "Congratulations."

Watching from her seat, Chocolate makes an announcement: "Anybody who wants my cookbook, give me your e-mail and I'll let you know when it comes out."

Tennant reads the names of more graduates -- Tyrone . . . Walter . . . Jared . . . Lindsay . . .

Chocolate is squirming in her seat. "I wanna be valedictorian," she yells.

Carlson is a freelance writer.

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