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October 4, 2007

25 years see growth for MAMA supporters

By ED COX
of *The Chronicle*

After 25 years, Sandee Burbank's controversial views on drugs haven't changed, but she's become more comfortable — and better at — backing them up.

Having just come from an interview on Al Wynn's "coffee break," she remembers being "scared to death" on the same show 2½ decades before and unable to respond when Rod Runyon asked, "Where did you get your information?"

"I had a briefcase full of things," recalls the executive director and co-founder of Mothers Against Misuse and Abuse (MAMA), "and of course I couldn't find it. Now, I've learned to say 'I'll get back to you.'"

For the most part, she doesn't have to. Now managing an arsenal of numbers with ease, she refers people to MAMA's web-site for documentation and sources, usually the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

It's a testament to how Burbank and her organization, founded in 1982 by seven women at a mountain cabin near Mosier, have grown up.

That maturity includes Burbank's 1997 recognition by the Drug Policy Foundation with the Robert C. Randall Award for Achievement in the Field of Citizen Action.

It also includes the 2005 opening of an office and clinic in Portland that now helps patients register for the Oregon Medical Marijuana Program and use the drug to effectively to deal with severe pain and other qualifying conditions.

That state program fits right in with the philosophy of MAMA, which, while not a strictly pro-cannabis group, asks that all drugs — legal and illegal — be judged on a level playing field.

"We want everybody who cares about their well-being to have the process available to them to evaluate a drug based on its benefits and risks," Burbank explains.

The group emphasizes personal responsibility and informed decision-making over strict faith in de facto federal distinctions between "safe" and unsafe drugs.

"It's those kind of thought processes that get people in trouble," Burbank says, noting that many don't realize that legally available drugs, including common, over-the-counter medicines can have dangerous side effects.

By way of illustration, she notes that aspirin and other non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs kill 17,000 Americans a year, the same number of fatalities attributed to all illicit drug use.

Meanwhile, tobacco, alcohol and caffeine combined kill 536,000 people, with nearly 14 times as many people addicted to alcohol or tobacco as to illegal drugs.

Burbank doesn't discount the noxious effects of some illegal drugs, especially ever-more-poisonous methamphetamine. Still, she says that meth is "kind of a direct result of prohibition," tracing its rise to increasing limits on the availability of diet pills, valium and other pharmaceuticals.

By contrast, "very few, if any negative health effects" have been reported from controlled marijuana use in Oregon's nearly 10-year-old medical program.

Burbank is registered with that program — although she says she was a cannabis user before it — as are Jack Thomas and Alice Ivany, who accompany her to our interview.

All three deal with constant pain. In the case of Burbank and Thomas, it's a result of auto or sports-related accidents; for Ivany, an amputee, it's from overuse of her remaining arm.

Ivany says that in 1993 her prescribed pain medications were causing her extreme nausea, vomiting and stupefaction. She went off them in favor of Tylenol, but ended up with half-doses because she did not tolerate it well.

It made things worse, rather than better, she says, as the pain in her remaining limb grew. Then, in 2001, she became a medical marijuana patient.

"It has improved the quality of my life," says Ivany, noting that she is not

stupefied and that cannabis reduces her inflammation and acts as an analgesic. "It controls my pain."

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