

# The High Times of Dana Beal

By John Turner

When President Joe Biden signed an executive order to pardon all residents of the U.S. who were convicted of simple marijuana possession last October, it was largely a symbolic step, as it affected only an estimated 6,500 people on the federal rap sheet. That is short of the 7.2 million arrested between 2001 and 2010 for simple possession.

However, it represented a major shift in the government's attitude towards the legalization and normalization of pot. America's battle with pot has raged since 1937 with the Marijuana Tax Act, which effectively made marijuana illegal in the U.S. In the turbulent 60s, young people started to push for changes in that law, which some 57 years later resulted in 19 states voting to make possession of small amounts of pot legal, and 32 making the use of medicinal marijuana available.

Over the years, many high-profile individuals from across the spectrum have spoken out and marched for legalization -- from poet Alan Ginsberg to comedians Cheech and Chong, to singer Willie Nelson, filmmaker Seth Rogen, rapper Snoop Dogg, CNN medical correspondent Sanja Gupta and PBS travel and tour guru Rick Steves. Closer to home, one person who has worked tirelessly since the 70s as an evangelist for the herb and is known in some circles as The Godfather of the modern pot legalization movement, is former Okemos school student Irwin Beal.

Dana, the name he prefers to go by, attended Okemos elementary school and continued through his first year of high school (1962), when he transferred to Eastern High School, in Lansing. Despite being a straight A high school student at Eastern, he was often ridiculed and ostracized for his long hair. At Okemos, Dana was rather aloof. One classmate remembered him as always outspoken, blatant and usually abrasive. He always championed controversial causes.



["Dana was a card-carrying member of the Young Socialist Alliance \(YSA\)," recalls Wally Reese \(1965\).](#) "I remember him spouting Marxist rhetoric as early as the fifth grade, though none of us had the slightest comprehension of what he was talking about. If he had been a little more creative, we might have played Capitalists and Communists instead of Cops and Robbers."

[Rod Ellis \(1965\)](#) remembers visiting his house and being amazed at the wall of hundreds of books there. Rod asked him if he had read every shelved book and Dana quickly remarked he had read most of them two and three times. I can attest to his reading habits, as Dana was the last stop on my bus route (Sand Hill Road) and I remember him carrying an armload of books every time he climbed the buses' rubber-covered metal steps. I noted that the book titles were not schoolbooks and changed every day, or so. I had no idea when he had time to read them.

It wasn't until we were both in Dale Brubaker's government class that I realized what he had absorbed from all that reading. Mr. Brubaker's class was a shock to our freshman mindset, as he incorporated a college level syllabus which included books on the theories behind the fundamentals of Communism and Socialism. We all had to read, or attempt to read, such books as Lenin by Shrub and the much easier to comprehend,

Animal Farm by George Orwell. When Mr. Brubaker would ask the class about a discussion point, his eyes would scan the room once and twice, until much to our relief, Dana's hand would shoot up, and he would begin his pronouncements.

Dana amazed us, because he not only had a full comprehension of the material but was also able to argue it point to point, head-to-head with Mr. Brubaker. I'm sure Mr. Brubaker appreciated the fact that a freshman could engage in discussions on such a level and that in itself kept him on his toes. A few years later, as the country was dealing with the draft, the Viet Nam war and student unrest, the thought crossed my mind "whatever happened to that fellow classmate who was able to theorize about class struggles and the role of alternate governments."

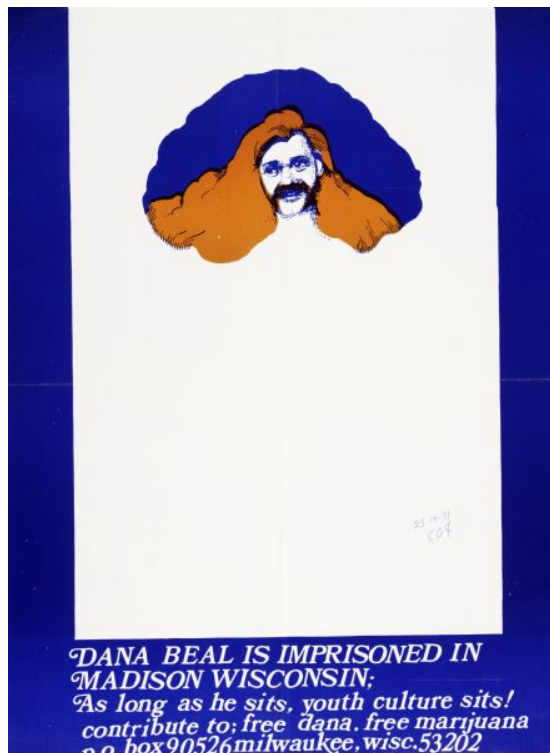
As a teenager, Dana started hanging around a bunch of MSU East Coast transplanted radicals, hippies, freaks, leftist and folkies who frequented a store in East Lansing called the Smokeshop. Around that time, he was also introduced to pot and other drugs. In 1964, he was committed by the state to a mental hospital (Kalamazoo State Hospital). Interviewed about that period of his life Dana recalled that the staff wouldn't let him write or read anything that was heavy because they thought it was a strain on his brain. They also told him they were going to keep him there for 5 years, until he was 22. That provoked him, so he escaped by walking out, continuing until he reached Lake Michigan.

Dana then moved to New York City, where his long career as an activist, agitator and organizer would unfold. In 1967, he put together his first marijuana smoke-in, which was attended by a

group of hippies, many who came already stoned.

Weeks later, he held more smoke-ins and at one he scored his

first narcotics arrest for selling LSD to a federal informer. His arrest sparked a march to 'free Dana Beal' (see poster) which drew a crowd of 3,000 supporters.



While gaining a reputation as pot reformer, Dana also began widening his interests in radical politics, interacting with anti-establishment leaders Jerry Rubin and Abbie Hoffman. He is credited as one of the first movement writers to argue for a merger of political radicalism and the psychedelic lifestyle. Hoffman felt that Dana was a unique blend of a street person and a theoretician and gave him credit for helping with the planning of the protests at the Chicago Democratic convention in 1968.

On the governments' radar, Dana was also arrested by the FBI in Miami, a week before Nixon's Republican Convention, in 1972. Later, as the Vietnam war was winding down and leftist sails were sagging. Dana took over the leadership and the occasional PR stunts of the Jerry Rubin's offshoot party, the Yippies (Youth International Party). Rubin nominated a pig for President and

later threw play money from the viewing gallery at the Stock Exchange. During his stint, Dana flowered, and over the years organized The Global Million Marijuana March (the first Saturday of every May). He worked on behalf of people with AIDs and cancer who frequently required medical marijuana and in 2016 brought a 51-foot inflatable joint to a Hillary Clinton rally, where he circulated an open letter asking her to remove cannabis from the Controlled Substances Act.

Dana also worked on a paper called the Yipster Times and was involved with a Yippie-produced television program called Highwitness, that broadcasted an alternative view of reality in New York City.

More recently, Dana focused on the legalization of the drug Ibogaine (a medical extract from the inner root bark of the Tabernanthe Iboga plant from West Africa), which he strongly believes can be used to interrupt addiction to opioids, cocaine and methamphetamines. (link to info: <https://ibogainefortheworld.org>) A few years back, when I was visiting New York City, I stopped by the Yippie Museum in the Bowery to see what Dana was up to and was told I had just missed him. He was on his way to South Africa to do some Ibogaine work. Dana had participated in Ibogaine forums in the Netherlands and Vienna. (Link to the conference: <https://ibogainefortheworld.com>)



In the Spring of 2021, Dana organized Joints for Jabs, where volunteers handed out more than a thousand joints to people who could show that they were over 21 and had received a Covid vaccination. His activism,



over the years, has prompted many legal brushes with the long arm of the law. In 2008, he was arrested on suspicion of money laundering. The following year he was arrested for possession of 150 pounds of marijuana, and two years later he was busted again, this time for transporting 186 pounds of weed. In 2017 he was arrested in California for a felony attempt to transport pot over state lines for sale.

Over the past 55 years, Dana has been in and out of jail, between bail hearings, on parole and under supervision. Along the way he has

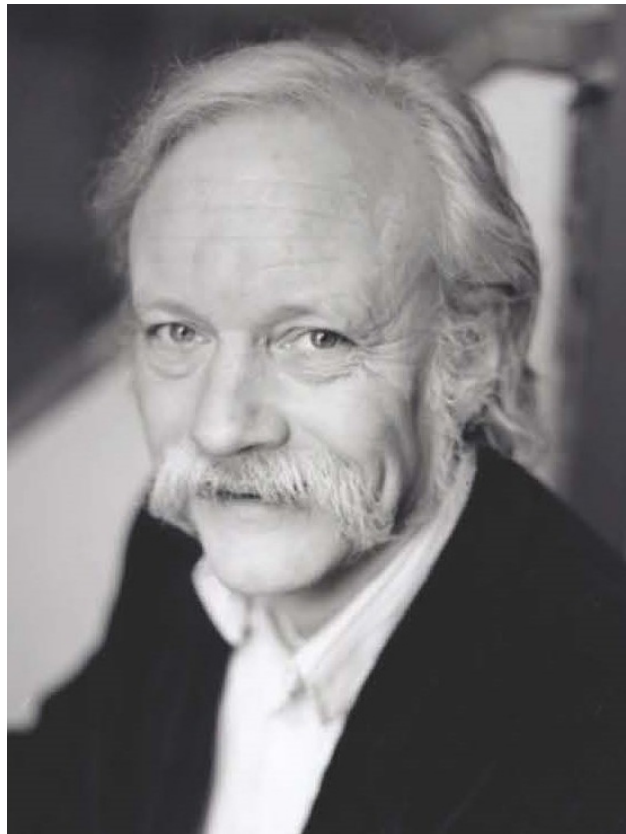
also picked up many staunch supporters. Rabbi Issac Freese of Brooklyn said that Dana helped open a medical co-op. "He sacrificed himself. He lost money. He went ahead and did it anyway, not for himself but so people could get the help they need." "Dana is needed today by the people he has helped. He has given them shelter, relief and a trusting heart". Dennis Brennen, a friend of Dana's recalled when he couldn't afford medical marijuana at \$30 to \$40 per gram. "He could get it for me at \$10 per gram. 'He helped many get affordable medical marijuana.'"



In a 2021 profile of Dana in the New York Times (attached below), writer Colin Moynihan believed that his far-reaching legacy may the hundreds of smoke-ins, marijuana marches, pot parades and smiliar events he has organized in New York City and beyond since 1967. Paul DeRienzo, a schoolteacher from New York, compared Dana to Galileo who was eventually proven right in his theories after 300 years. “Let’s not take 300 years to prove Dana right. Dana has been right all along.”

The author of this article does not take a stance on whether Dana Beal is a pro pot hero or a villain with a criminal with a rap sheet. However, he does feel that Dana played a significant part of the politics of the 60’s and 70s and made a major contribution to the legalization of marijuana, a drug used by millions of Americans for recreational and medicinal purposes. The fact that Dana does not the fit the general profile of an Okemos High overachiever in the sciences, arts, writing and athletics, shouldn’t prevent this recognition. (How many of his Okemos classmates of 1965 have their [own Wikipedia page](#)?!)

“Marijuana is like a health movement,” Dana once said. “It’s a movement away from the harder drugs like nicotine and alcohol, towards a little flower.”



[Google: Dana Beal](#)



# *He Fought for Decades to Make Marijuana Legal. Now What?*

Dana Beal, a longtime Yippie, staged protests and fought the law and spent time in jail to make weed available for all. Is there a future in pot activism?

By **Colin Moynihan**

Published April 29, 2021 Updated May 6, 2021

Dana Beal stood in Union Square Park explaining the provenance of the pot being given away to a crowd of expectant people who were gathering near a bronze statue of George Washington astride a horse.

He acknowledged that it might not be of the “green, fresh, aromatic, piney, incredibly potent” variety that is most popular. But it nonetheless possessed properties that would deliver a respectable high.

On top of that, Mr. Beal’s shrug seemed to say, it was free. He squinted into the sunlight, his white hair and generous mustache making him resemble a contemporary version of Mark Twain about to dispense a pithy insight.

“It’s just expired from the standpoint that nobody will buy it,” he said. “There’s nothing wrong with it.”

Over the next several hours, on April 20, volunteers organized by Mr. Beal, members of the group Act Up and others handed out more than a thousand joints to people who could show that they were at least 21 and had received a Covid vaccine. A similar distribution is planned for May 1 to coincide with an annual May Day marijuana march held in Manhattan.



People who could prove they had been vaccinated could claim free marijuana cigarettes at the event. Julia Gillard for The New York Times

The giveaways are lawful under a New York State law enacted on March 31 that says people 21 and older can smoke marijuana anywhere tobacco smoking is allowed and may possess up to three ounces for recreational use.

Judging from attendance on April 20 — an unofficial pot smoker’s holiday with hazy roots in a tale about Californians who used to smoke at 4:20 each afternoon — the new rules would appear to be popular. A line that wrapped around Union Square included people in jackets and ties, running gear and shirts emblazoned with images of marijuana leaves. One man rolled up a sleeve to show a tattoo of a seven-

pointed leaf on his forearm along with the word “stoners.” Some people who received joints casually lighted them up almost immediately, an act that has been illegal for most of Mr. Beal’s 74 years.

His decades demanding pot legalization have included battles with the authorities, arrests, stints in jail and the loss of a home. Now that public policy is beginning to catch up with positions he has long espoused, Mr. Beal is facing a set of new challenges. To start, what does he do next?

A longtime leader of the Youth International Party, more commonly known as the Yippies, Mr. Beal is a familiar figure within drug policy circles. He has spent years championing the use of Ibogaine, a derivative of an African shrub that is banned in the United States, to interrupt addiction to opioids, cocaine and methamphetamines.

But his most far-reaching legacy may be the hundreds of smoke-ins, marijuana marches, pot parades and similar events that he has organized in New York City and beyond since 1967.

Brandon Cuicchi of Act Up, an activist group that was started in the 1980s to address the AIDS crisis, said the organization had several reasons for taking part in the joint giveaways. Many people with AIDS or H.I.V., for instance, have turned to medical marijuana to ease the effects of antiretroviral medications, he said. Then there was the chance to work with Mr. Beal.

“Dana is the godfather of the modern pot legalization movement,” Mr. Cuicchi said. “His dedication has been unparalleled.”

Mr. Beal says it has also had a cost.

He has been arrested numerous times on marijuana-related charges. In 2008 the police in Mattoon, Ill., confiscated more than \$150,000 in cash that he had been traveling with. Mr. Beal’s lawyer said the authorities had told him the money “[smelled like marijuana.](#)” (Friends said Mr. Beal had told them he was transporting the money to finance an Ibogaine clinic.)

While Mr. Beal may be widely acknowledged as a force within the pot legalization movement, he acknowledges sparring over the years with other marijuana advocates, including some at the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws (NORML), who Mr. Beal said believed the events he organized were too rambunctious.





Mr. Beal, pushing the wheelchair at left, in 1997 at City Hall in New York with other advocates for legalizing medical marijuana. Rosario Esposito/Associated Press

“For 50 years a lot of people were uptight about smoke-ins, so they were uptight about me,” he said, wearing a tweed jacket and scuffed black cowboy boots as he surveyed the crowd in Union Square. “When does it end?”

Steve Bloom, an organizer of this year’s marijuana march and the publisher of the website [CelebStoner](#), said those differences had been largely stylistic.

“The Yippies are pranksters and street artists and guerrilla theater people,” he said. “NORML was a little more buttoned down and into lobbying and convincing Congress to change the laws.”

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Mr. Beal got to know members of the Yippies in the 1960s before they adopted that name. He was living in the East Village then, part of an influx of younger people from across the country whose utopian ideas and unconventional behavior frequently rankled existing residents and the local authorities.

On Memorial Day in 1967, police officers [beat and arrested](#) hippies in Tompkins Square Park who had ignored orders to stop playing bongos and chanting. Two days later a group of what witnesses cited by The New York Times described as “at least 20 Spanish-speaking young men” [tried to tear the clothes](#) off a 29-year-old woman who they believed was a hippie.

Mr. Beal's response was to organize his first smoke-in, holding it in Tompkins Square and aiming to unite hippies and Puerto Rican youths.

"We realized there was something these people who were fighting had in common," Mr. Beal said recently, adding: "Weed."

Another smoke-in that Mr. Beal helped organize, in 1970, was meant to counter a Fourth of July event in Washington called Honor America Day, which had been arranged by supporters of the war in Vietnam.

A report [describing the event](#) in The Times described fights between "long-hairs" and "crew-cuts." The police deployed clouds of tear gas.

"They were confronted by thousands of hippies blowing smoke," Mr. Beal said of those who attended the official event on the grounds of the Washington Monument. "It was really a pie in the face for Richard Nixon."

The following year, Abbie Hoffman [described Mr. Beal](#), who had written articles calling for militancy but criticizing elitism and lack of humanity in more violent groups, as "a unique blend of a street person and a theoretician."

Most of the marches and smoke-ins Mr. Beal has been involved with since then have been relatively tranquil, but tensions have occasionally flared.

In 1998 the City of New York blocked pot advocates from gathering in Washington Square Park for what had become an annual smoke-in by [issuing a permit](#) for an event there called Family Day that included mimes, jugglers and corporate sponsorship from Rolling Stone magazine.

Mr. Beal pronounced the turn of events Orwellian. "It's '1984' in 1998," he said at the time, lamenting "the passing of the Village as we once knew it."

He was certainly prescient on that point. By the turn of the millennium, the three-story brick building at 9 Bleecker Street that the Yippies had rented since 1973, using it as their home base and staging ground for protests, was a valuable property in a gentrifying New York.



Mr. Beal with a New York Stock Exchange security guard at a Wall Street protest by Yippies in 2001. Richard Perry/The New York Times

The building's owner wanted to sell 9 Bleecker to a developer, Mr. Beal said, but he and another resident fought back, arguing that they should be given the chance to buy it.



They prevailed in 2004, [purchasing the building](#) for \$1.2 million with the plan of bringing in revenue through a cafe and a museum. But according to court papers, the new owners, Yippie Holdings and a nonprofit called the National Aids Brigade, failed to make mortgage payments on time. Foreclosure proceedings followed, and a judge ordered residents to vacate the building in 2014.

When the [deadline to move out](#) arrived, however, Mr. Beal was in prison. He had been arrested in Nebraska in 2009 and in Wisconsin in 2011, both times while traveling with more than 100 pounds of marijuana.

Mr. Beal said during a court hearing in Wisconsin that he was transporting medical marijuana from California to Michigan, New York City and Washington, D.C.

A judge in Wisconsin sentenced him to more than two years in state prison. But a few days later Mr. Beal had a heart attack while in a county jail awaiting transfer. His heart stopped for about three minutes. He spent the next six days in a medically induced coma.

“I was dead, man,” he said. “I’m in the second reel of a movie that wasn’t supposed to have a second reel.”

Since leaving prison in 2014, Mr. Beal has lived in a garret above a Midtown synagogue. That arrangement is not permanent, however. Mr. Beal said that he had been ordered to leave and remains only because of pandemic measures that have delayed evictions.



Mr. Beal is living above a Midtown synagogue, a temporary, but comfortable, arrangement. Julia Gillard for The New York Times

He has recently felt pressure to provide for his future, observing that there is no pension plan for political activists. Still, Mr. Beal was in an expansive mood during a recent visit to his quarters, musing on the trajectory of his career and his plans from here on out.

He paged through a thick book titled “Molecular Neuropharmacology” which he had read in prison. He unfurled a poster from the 1970 Washington smoke-in that showed a blue peace sign and green pot leaf superimposed on a background of horizontal red and white stripes.

Mr. Beal said he would continue campaigning for national legalization of marijuana, pointing to the new laws in New York State as a precedent. And, he said, he will lobby the New York City Council to allow medical marijuana users to grow their own supply on empty city-owned lots.

Beyond that, Mr. Beal said, he has ideas for how to attract investors to help him open a string of Ibogaine clinics overseas that can treat addiction and also help him attain a degree of stability.

“I would say we’re right on the verge of all these things happening,” he said, sitting at a desk in the corner of the garret, his cowboy boots propped on a chair. “Maybe this is my time.”

***A correction was made on May 6, 2021: An earlier version of this article misidentified the date when marijuana was legalized in New York. It was March 31, not March 30.***

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