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Riding along with a mobile marijuana dispensary

As feds try to cripple California's medical marijuana storefronts, they've moved dealers to the road. We ride along

BY KATYA CENGEL



(Credit: Reuters/Cliff Despeaux)

in 2004. But after a federal crackdown on storefront dispensaries — the feds don't recognize the medical marijuana exception — mobile businesses stepped up their trade, employing the same personal delivery model Rodney used two decades before.

So meet Mike, a white kid from the suburbs who compares delivering weed to working for Domino's and maintains a backup plan of grad school. Medical marijuana columnist David Downs calls the mobile business "the perfect crystallization of America's denialism about its pot habit." The whole thing is pretty twisted. Earlier this month, while the feds were kicking the crackdown into high gear in Los Angeles, the city decided to repeal the ban on dispensaries it had passed just months before. Unsure when I'd get my next chance to ride with a mobile dispensary, I decided to join Mike on the road.

We agreed to meet in an East Oakland parking lot at 11:30 on a Friday morning. I wondered whether Mike would show. Most of my other contacts in the industry had declined my offer to accompany them on their routes. But when Mike called my cellphone it wasn't to cancel but to let me know he was on his way.

A few minutes later I found myself riding shotgun in a non-descript sedan Mike referred to as the Playbud Delivery Service's "company car." On the phone, Mike's voice had the slow cadence of the streets. In person he was a lanky 24-year-old with light eyes and stubble, dressed in a button-down shirt and twill shorts. He played baseball in college and started using marijuana medically to deal with a painful back injury.

My first drug deal was back in high school. The student who sat next to me in American Government handed me a baggie to pass to a kid sitting a few seats away. The money transferred hands the same way, kid to kid, just like we passed handouts on the judicial, legislative and executive branches.

I was a little unsure whether my minor role in the proceedings was incriminating. But there was no question in my mind Rodney was engaging in illegal behavior. We might have been at Berkeley High School, but selling marijuana was still against the law.

Not so today. California began allowing medical marijuana use in 1996, and permitting caregivers and patient associations to cultivate and distribute it

One of his two cellphones rings and he answers with a “what’s up, buddy.” He instructs the caller to put something, possibly an order, under his name and adjust the pricing. He uses his other phone to highlight our route. We are headed to a nearby city where a woman is waiting for the rest of her order. Yesterday she was given an eighth when she ordered a quarter-ounce so Mike is returning today with another eighth and a receipt that shows that Playbud has verified her medical note.

“We’re not doing anything illegal here,” he says.

A few minutes later his confidence has waned.

“Right now I think I’m doing something legal. But in five minutes I could be doing something completely illegal, you know, on a federal level.”

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David Downs has been covering the marijuana beat for three years for the East Bay Express. He explained that while mobile dispensaries have long been prominent in Southern California, they really gained ground in the north following last October’s crackdown. You can find dozens of Bay Area mobile dispensaries on weedmaps.com. There are several cases the state Supreme Court is expected to rule on later this year — including one on whether localities have a right to ban dispensaries under state law — and which may or may not clear up the schizophrenic response that has so far characterized the California scene.

In the meantime, many in the trade believe mobile businesses remain the safer bet because of their lower visibility. But they transport marijuana — which is another aspect of the trade that operates in a bit of legal limbo. Downs has heard both of drivers being sent to sting locations and arrested, and drivers that have been robbed and then sought the help of law enforcement officers. The vagueness of the laws means those in the business are continually in danger of being arrested.

“Those guys are just one step away from the underworld,” said Downs.

Mike’s boss at Playbud agreed to speak by phone, but also did not want his last name used. Playbud, he said, was founded half a year ago by a small group of growers uncomfortable with the visibility of storefronts and the steep markups they felt they were passing on to customers. They make anywhere from 10 to 20 deliveries a day to a patient base of around 2,500 people. The usual order runs about \$50 and the usual sickness is stress. Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays tend to be their busiest days, although Mike told me Mondays are also hectic. Security is probably the most difficult aspect of the business. They stop delivering at 7 p.m. After verifying a patients’ medical note, they talk to them on the phone and study their picture identification.

In the beginning, some of the pictures made Mike apprehensive. Delivering drugs to strangers struck him as a bit dangerous. But he decided, perhaps naively, that a doctor wouldn’t give a medical note to anyone truly dangerous. He has delivered to a lot of veterans, unusually calm 20- and 30-year-olds who served in Iraq and Afghanistan. He has also delivered to a baseball fan who invited him in to watch a Giants game.

We are off the freeway now and Mike is using his phone to navigate. He makes one or two deliveries at a time, stopping back at the Oakland office in between to play ping-pong, eat and watch television. The casual setup sounds a bit like the tech company model; I am disappointed there will be no tour. Orders are made over the Internet or the phone and tend to spike around 4 p.m. They offer a discount if you order the night before. Few do. Mike slows down as he turns onto a street with speed bumps and a 15 mph speed limit.

“1018 is what we’re looking for,” he says.

He scans the stucco houses and condos, pulling a quick three-point turn when he spots the right address. He parks the car and grabs a small brown paper bag from the back seat.

“That’s not to hide it from the public,” he says. “It’s just you don’t want kids seeing big bags of cannabis.”

He then grabs a black cash purse, something he also doesn’t like people to see. A fanny pack would probably be less obvious, but he won’t wear one of those. He strides to the condo and knocks. He is always invited in.

“A lot of the patients get worried that their neighbors will find out — so they bring you into their house real quick. And they try to keep you around a little bit longer,” he said earlier.

* * *

The week before I met Mike, I connected with Aaron, president and driver for Tea House Collective, a Berkeley-based mobile business with farms in Humboldt County. Aaron had made the 300-mile drive to the Bay Area a few days earlier.

“The hardest part is coming out of Humboldt County with herb, and Mendocino actually, the whole 101 [highway], all the way to here,” he said. “They know where we’re going.”

He has heard from friends who have been stopped by highway patrol that if you have your paperwork, the authorities will usually let you go. Still, he doesn’t like anyone to know too much about his schedule.

“I’m not really worried about getting robbed,” he said. “I’m worried about the cops, the feds. I don’t want them to know anything.”

He has reason to worry. Tea House has had its bank accounts shut down before. In person, Aaron is small with a soft voice, dreads and tattoos. At 37, he is by far the youngest member of the collective of Humboldt farmers who grow organic, sustainably farmed cannabis, which is delivered to the Bay Area. Charley Custer co-founded the collective as a counter to the big grows that populate Humboldt County. The 22 farmers who belong to it don’t grow more than 30 or 40 plants and operate off the grid, relying on solar and hydro power. Aaron delivers their product to a group of maybe 500 Bay Area members, making anywhere from two to nine deliveries a day. A lot of the patients he meets are suffering from stress. Back injuries are another common complaint. Then there are the older people trying cannabis for the first time.

“Some of them are just really new to this; they’re in their 70s or 80s and they want to try it because all their friends have tried it and it’s helped them,” he said.

He tends to stay and talk, introducing the older patients to the paraphernalia and walking them through the process of getting high.

Mike ended up staying about five minutes with his patient. He said the woman recognized him from a previous delivery and remarked on his height.

“You just sort of banter with them, make them feel comfortable, because for some people it’s an uncomfortable transaction,” he says.

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Back at 1018, Mike had been about to walk away when his customer finally opened the door and ushered him in. Back in the car he throws the cash purse in the back seat. Playbud is cash only, charges tax and offers an employee discount. Sometimes drivers are tipped. The tips go in their pockets and the money in a safe.

We are back on the freeway now and traffic is stopped. As we inch by what looks like an accident or a temporary construction project, Mike mutters under his breath, “Jesus, a ton of cops.” Even during the busy afternoon hours he never carries more than a couple of orders at once in case a cop pulls him over. It happened once.

“I had everything right there, it was completely in visible sight. He didn’t ask any questions so you just move on with the

day,” he said. “It’s not like you’re going to go out and tell him.”

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