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Inside vets' fight for medical cannabis amid Reefer Madness politics

By [Nat Stein](#) @natstein[click to enlarge](#)

NAT STEIN

Wounded vet Steve DeFino holds jars of homegrown sativa bud.

Steve DeFino is remarkably mellow for a guy with shrapnel still lodged in his body and memories of war on his mind.

At the Dab Lounge on Circle Drive near Palmer Park Boulevard, a light haze drifts above the booths, about half of which are occupied on this weekday afternoon. A few dogs roam around, as do some pool balls on the newish table. "A year ago I couldn't do this," DeFino says, sitting on a stool in the back of the place where the arcade machines' bleeps and bloops weave into a soundtrack of '90s R&B.

DeFino is tatted, stubbled and hefty — not the type you'd expect to feel uncomfortable or unsafe anywhere, let alone a club on a slow day.

"I mean, I was broken. I'd shake and flip out every other day. It was bad," he says of the early days of his recovery.

The day that forever altered the course of his life was April 11, 2008.

He tells it like this.

World away

As part of the siege of Sadr City, a Baghdad suburb, Echo Company 1/68 Angel Makers platoon's mission was to clear a route so another unit could erect a wall that would stop rocket attacks on U.S. bases.

"In the first 30 seconds, an IED (improvised explosive device) goes off and 20 seconds later, another," remembers DeFino, then a 28-year-old Army sergeant. "But there are lives behind us so we just keep going."

His buddy in front fell back, so DeFino takes the lead. That's when a 13-inch EFP (explosively formed penetrator) nails him in the back.

"All my lights went out, and I thought that was it," he remembers. "I thought I was dead. There was a lot that went through my head then, you know, like my family and what my life had come to and why I am here. It was like, this is it. Then I thought, 'I can't go out like this,' and just summoned it."

DeFino survived, but with a gaping hole in his back through which you could touch his pelvic bone. He had three blood transfusions, 11 surgeries and more than 100 shards of concrete, copper, fiberglass, aluminum and explosive removed before being flown back home to the States, where he'd start the next phase of his battle.

Abandoned at home

"I did my job over there, and I come back and had no insurance. Something got messed up," DeFino says. During that time, he says, he underwent 80 surgeries and paid more than \$2,000 a month for the 25 medications he took daily — a daunting prospect for someone disabled, unemployed and with a family to support. The VA can't divulge specific information about insurance in this case, but a spokesman did comment that "the bureaucratic process can be very confusing and frustrating."

That pharmaceutical cocktail didn't work.

"There was a three- to five-month wait to see a therapist through the VA; meanwhile I'm sitting here on pills," he remembers. He secluded himself at home, drank heavily, gained weight, stopped showering and often careened into angry outbursts.

"I shut off for a good three years. I'd go to the park and see other guys rolling around with their kids, having a good time and here I was with a cane. I would try to play with my daughter and just be in pain," he says. "I felt worthless."

Despite his despondency, he carried on with his regimen of therapy — re-learning to walk, talk, read, write and do math — but gained no satisfaction from slow progress. If anything, it just numbed him further.

"I felt like a zombie," DeFino remembers. "I had become a hollow shell that just existed ... dead on the inside. I contemplated suicide daily."

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STEVE DEFINO

Bobo the monkey survived the firefight too.

Back on track

After moving to a quieter back room at the Dab Lounge, DeFino speaks calmly, even matter-of-factly, about those darker days — possible only because they're behind him. The explosion that blew his life to pieces was quite obviously traumatic. Those spiritual wounds made picking up the pieces painful, but he resolved to do it for his young daughter.

"That's what gave me my purpose then," he says.

But willingness to get better was only the first step. He also had to be able. And for him that meant, in part, finding a treatment that worked.

DeFino grabs his Army backpack that's stashed below the faux leather couch. It's full of clunky mason jars full of homegrown weed. The buds inside are nice — dense, crystalline and stinky (which he acknowledges with a devilishly proud grin).

"I never touched cannabis when I was in [the military], I followed the rules," DeFino says. "But then after, I'd see guys doing way better than me, and I asked what they were doing and found out they were smoking weed. I was eating opioids like candy at the time, so I was like, 'Why the hell not? I'll try it.' Within a couple of weeks I was totally off those drugs."

DeFino is on the MMJ registry to treat his severe pain and persistent muscle spasms. His doctor recommends 20 ounces of marijuana a month, which he grows himself. With an average yield of 2 ounces per plant every three months, that translates to 60 total plants (because only half can be flowering at a time). That personalized treatment plan comes from extensive conversations between him and his doctor in Littleton.

Unscrewing jar after jar, he smells the buds and rattles on about the importance of rotating strains to get different cannabinoids and terpenes into his system.

Home grow is the way to go, he says, to tailor the medicine to his specific needs — a variety of rotating strains, strictly sativa — and, frankly, just to afford it. (An ounce at the medical dispensaries in the Springs runs around \$150. So for the 20 ounces a month his doctor recommends, DeFino would be looking at dropping \$3,000 a month on medicine.)

DeFino's home grow is dialed to a T, though he sometimes harvests more cannabis than he needs. So what does he do with that surplus? He shares.

Pass it around

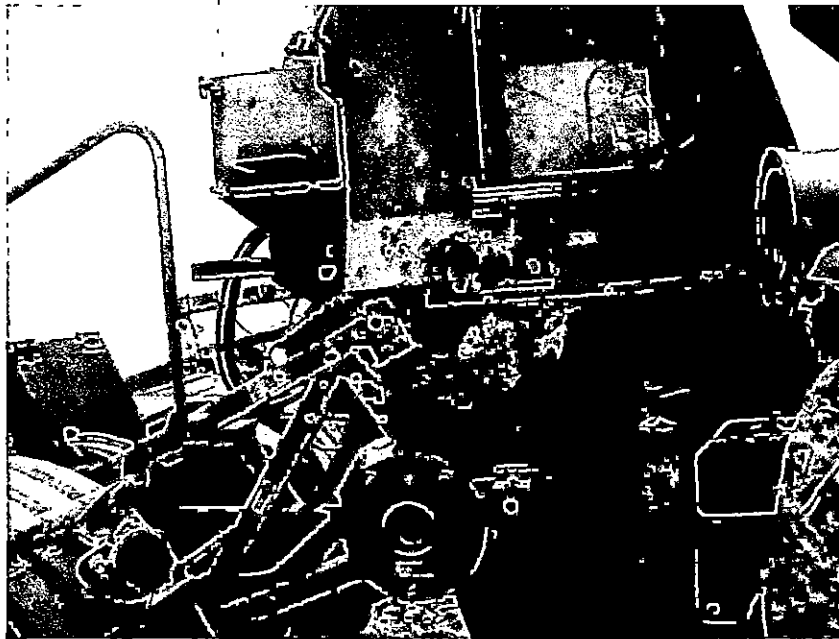
"We'd get together, just a group of vets, hang out, smoke weed and just create that positive environment," DeFino says. "This is not about getting stoned. This is how we heal."

What started as an informal social network turned into an organization called Veteran Farmers Alliance. It's not a registered 501(c) nonprofit yet, but once it is, DeFino hopes to increase the donations he can distribute and maybe take other vets on fishing and riding trips.

The Dab Lounge was a natural partner for the Veteran Farmers Alliance. The club plays host to events for vets to come together, share medicine and educate each other about how to treat their war wounds with cannabis. One such event, a "Spring Bake weekend" in March, facilitated the distribution of more than \$14,000 worth of donated cannabis and cannabis-related products to vets in need.

Another, more ambitious giveaway is in the works for the fall, but DeFino worries the event could be without a venue since the Colorado Springs City Council voted last month to rid the city of all clubs by 2024. The three ordinances comprising that legislation won't go into effect until an ongoing petition effort reaches resolution.

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STEVE DEFINO

This is what heavy engagement looks like.

Cannabis clubs are spread all over the city: the Dab Lounge in the east-central area; myclub420 to the west; Speakeasy and Lazy Lion farther out east; and Studio A64 downtown. Each has a different vibe and attracts a different scene. One solid unifier, however, is that all of these spots are heavily frequented by veterans of the U.S. military. Which, of course, is not unusual in a city that's home to nearly 54,000 vets, according to the last Census count.

But this small handful of clubs — 15 compared to 776 liquor-licensed establishments — has outsized value for many local veterans who want or need a place to consume cannabis in a private but social environment. One major reason for this? The regulation of legal marijuana use is largely tied to housing status.

Homeless vets in Colorado Springs face citation for public consumption, should they medicate in public. Many landlords forbid marijuana use, as does government-funded housing. Folks travelling from out of state who want to try some of our legal specialty have a handful of 420-friendly motels and Airbnbs to choose from, or risk running into cops in public parks and on street corners. Lastly, plenty of folks, no matter their access to housing, just want somewhere to get together, relax and smoke a joint (as is their right under the Colorado Constitution).

Cannabis clubs are the only places in the Springs, except for private homes, that serve all these functions for locals, and if they do end up shuttered, the veteran community stands to lose especially hard.

"I get guys who come to me here asking for help, and just that itself is a huge victory," DeFino says. "They know to find us here."

Coming conundrum

While the political battle to overturn the club ban rages on, DeFino is focused on another policy making its way through the procedural pipes that could put patients' supplies in a tight spot.

A proposed city ordinance would limit home grows to 12 plants, no matter the number a patient's doctor recommends. Should it become law, grows larger than 12 plants would be permitted only in industrial zones with proper licensing (no small feat, especially if you're disabled and/or lacking funds).

Many patients would have to choose between obeying the law or following a doctor's recommendation. "So I have to save up \$10,000, \$15,000 and go buy industrial land?" DeFino asks, facetiously contemplating the prospect. "The reality is, I can't."

He also has qualms about the process. No patients or caregivers sat on the city's task force, whose members (at least some of them) seemed to have come to the table with their minds already made up. Besides that, the word didn't really get out.

"Nobody knows about this, I can hardly keep track of when it's going to come up at Council," DeFino says. "Then you expect vets already with super-high anxiety to go up [to City Hall] to go speak out about it? Most guys can't do it. They break down."

DeFino says he doesn't have faith that the majority of City Council would heed vets' wishes, even if enough veterans did show up to make their opinions known.

"You see a lot of stickers and hear a lot of talk like, 'Oh, support our troops,' but that's kind of where it ends," DeFino says pointedly. "Council doesn't know anything about cannabis other than it's a scary drug. Their views don't match the views of the new generation that's living in the Springs now."

In the near future, DeFino is committed to helping the clubs fight for their continued existence and, at the same time, nip the plant-limit ordinance in the bud. Accomplishing those two objectives won't be easy, and they won't be the end of the battle. But if there's one thing that gets DeFino fired up, it's having a purpose. And right now, fighting for vets' access to cannabis is his singular purpose.

"When things sucked over there, and I mean it got really rough, all you care about is the guy on your right, the guy on your left and getting them home safe," DeFino says. "So when we get out and come back, that's what we need. The love, appreciation, camaraderie — that's what helps us heal."

And with that support system under attack, Steve DeFino is responding exactly how the military taught him — with unwavering intensity and uncompromising resolve.

In his words: "Piss off enough vets, and you'll see what happens."

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