

Grandma argues pot helps manage pain

By *MARK CAUDILL*
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MANSFIELD -- Susan Stevens said she has a "million diagnoses."

The 62-year-old grandmother said she has fibromyalgia, or widespread muscle pain, as well as glaucoma, asthma and sleep apnea. She sustained a number of broken bones in a 1998 car accident and a 1999 incident in which she was trampled by a horse.

Stevens' way of dealing with the pain has her in trouble with the law.

Police removed about 30 marijuana plants from her Sturges Avenue yard Sept. 15.

Stevens was indicted in January for possession and illegal cultivation of drugs. She pleaded not guilty to the charges Tuesday and was released on a personal recognizance bond.

"I don't want to be a criminal and contribute to any drug-dealing," Stevens said. "If I bought it on the street, it would have been a \$100 waiver."

Because of the amount of marijuana police seized, Stevens is looking at something much more serious. She could receive up to 13 years in prison.

"The quantity that she had was a third-degree felony," Richland County Assistant Prosecutor Bambi Couch-Page said. "The fact that she was cultivating that quantity makes it (second charge) a second-degree felony."

Couch-Page said the confiscated marijuana weighed 5,821.6 grams. METRICH Enforcement Unit Commander Lt. Dino Sgambellone said that translates to nearly 13 pounds and an estimated street value of \$15,600.

When asked for his opinion on the case, Sgambellone deferred to his job.

"In law enforcement, it really doesn't matter what our opinions are for using marijuana for medicinal purposes, because in Ohio, it is against the law," he said. "My job is not to pick and choose what laws I will enforce. Rather, it is to enforce the law regardless of my opinion of it."

Couch-Page agreed.

"The law's the law," she said. "You just can't say, 'OK, we'll make an exception.' If you do that, everybody will be growing it in their back yards."

But Stevens isn't without supporters. The Ohio Patient Network and North Ohio Marijuana News and Laws (NORML) are paying for her legal defense.

"There are 14 states that have laws to protect people who use marijuana for medicinal purposes," Tonya Davis of the Ohio Patient Network said. "We are not junkies trying to get high."

Davis, who lives in Kettering, said she has a crippling terminal disease. She helped write the Ohio Medical Compassion Act, which Sen. Tom Roberts, D-Dayton, introduced last year as Ohio Senate Bill 343. The bill, which would have legalized marijuana for medical use, died in committee.

Davis said the bill will be reintroduced in the coming weeks.

That's welcome news for Stevens, who hopes to be grandfathered in if the bill becomes law.

Stevens was in bed when city police arrived at her door at 2:41 a.m. Sept. 15.

"They said, 'We're here for the marijuana in your back yard.' " she said. "I had just had surgery on my leg. I was hobbling."

Stevens has two Lab-mix dogs. She said one of the officers threatened to shoot them if they caused any problems. She put the dogs in her car to make them think they were going for a ride.

"I said, 'Are you guys in a hurry 'cause you just got here,' " Stevens said to police. "I have a peculiar spirit. I'm not trying to make light of this."

Stevens said police asked her to whom she was selling the drugs.

"I said, 'That's not this at all,' " she replied.

Five months later, Stevens is still upset.

I have a hard time believing that police are jerking plants out of the ground at 3 a.m.," she said.

Stevens fractured both elbows when her car was rear-ended in a 1998 accident. She knew the impact was coming and braced herself.

That was only the beginning.

In 1999, she said she was trampled by a quarter horse at the Richland County Fairgrounds. She was watching the horse for a 4-H member.

"Something spooked him," Stevens said.

She broke her shoulder and arm, tore a rotator cuff and had a concussion. She ended up on disability.

"I started going to doctors, and I started taking narcotics," Stevens said. "I (eventually) stopped taking drugs. They were poisoning me."

While taking classes at North Central State College, Stevens learned about holistic healing.

"You treat the mind, body and spirit," she said. "You do not consider only AMA (American Medical Association) medication. You use herbal medication. I do tai chi."

While she can't discuss specifics of her case, Stevens said the idea of smoking marijuana blunts is inaccurate. She said marijuana dissolves in butter and can be used in cooking.

"It's certainly beneficial," she said. "It keeps the pressure under control in my eyes without further (laser) surgery. It controls pain."

Stevens hopes the reintroduced bill will become law.

"I think there is valuable information in his herb," she said. "It's called the Ohio Medical Compassion Act for a reason."

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