

Largest-ever drug reform conference brings out crowds

Contributed by Tristin Coffman

Panels cover wide spectrum of policy approaches

Drug Policy Alliance director Ethan Nadelmann welcomed nearly 1000 participants to Long Beach in November for three days of intensive panel discussions, workshops and informal networking among drug policy reform at the biennial DPA conference.

The 2005 International Drug Policy Reform Conference lived up to its theme of "building a movement." This was the largest such gathering on record, and by a show of hands, nearly half those present had never before attended one. Common Sense for Drug Policy had provided scholarships to many who would otherwise have been unable to attend the historic gathering. With over 200 presenters in the lineup, panels were led not only by academic experts, but by people directly affected by the policies being discussed. Speakers included formerly incarcerated people, drug users, youth, parents and more.

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Among the elected officials who attended were CA Assemblyman Mark Leno, who announced his new bill AB 1147 during a panel on industrial hemp, and Mayor Rocky Anderson of Salt Lake City. Students for Sensible Drug Policy was well represented, as were NORML, MPP, Americans for Safe Access, needle exchangers, harm reductionists, and scores of other community action groups.

Human Rights and the Drug War marked its tenth anniversary with a display showing convicted drug offenders, their sentences and their families along with updates on where they are now (see hr95.org for more). Several former POWs were at the conference in person working the crowd to support various reform projects. Many POWs from the original exhibit are still in prison, some served their full sentences and some got early releases, but depressingly few of the nation's cruel and unusual criminalization policies have changed in a decade. Tragically, some policies are even worse than in 1994.

Law enforcement now engaged

One noteworthy improvement has been the rise of Law Enforcement Against Prohibition, a group founded by former undercover narcotics officers such as LEAP director Jack Cole, who received an award from DPA for his work. Seattle's former police chief and recently avowed drug legalizer Norm Stamper introduced Cole, who spoke of his own epiphany and regrets, and humbly acknowledged all his colleagues in LEAP, noting that law enforcement is actually another

victim of the drug war by driving a wedge between it and the community and making it hard to convince idealistic young people to become police officers and district attorneys. The corruption and abuses fostered by drug prohibition make it hard to keep quality personnel and to keep them from becoming corrupted or disillusioned.

The conference featured an unusually tight schedule that often had nine panels speaking simultaneously on needle exchange, harm reduction, medical marijuana, local voter initiatives, international issues, race, public records, community organizing, the Internet, news media or one of dozens of other topics. This gave many people, who otherwise would have been excluded in the interest of time, an opportunity to present their work and share experiences and for others to sit in on discussions they rarely hear.

A multi-denominational religious service brought together a cross-section of activists to speak and meditate on the moral implications of the Drug War and to commemorate the passage of reformers and victims of the Drug War. The DPA (drugpolicy.org) was formed when two major reform groups, Drug Policy Foundation and the Lindesmith Center, merged. Among this year's awards:

Corrals receive research award

Californians Valerie and Michael Corral won The Norman E. Zinberg Award for Achievement in the Field of Medicine. This award recognizes medical and treatment experts who perform rigorous scientific research and who have the courage to report their findings that may be at odds with current dogma. Valerie began using cannabis as replacement for a rigorous pharmaceutical regimen following an auto accident in 1973 that caused a brain trauma and resulted in epilepsy.

The Corrals were arrested in 1992 for cultivating five plants. Spurred by the arrest, they became involved in the campaign to legalize medical marijuana and were first in the state to win on a necessity defense. Both have served as expert witnesses in court, they head up WAMM, co-developed the Santa Cruz County Medical Marijuana ID Card Program, and Valerie testified to the Senate Health Committee.

MAP activists honored

DrugSense and its Media Awareness Project (MAP) took the Robert C. Randall Award for Achievement in the Field of Citizen Action, which honors citizens who make democracy work in the difficult area of drug law and policy reform.

DrugSense and MAP comprise a nationwide network of volunteer activists dedicated to disseminating honest and accurate information on all aspects of drug policy to the media, policy makers, and the general public. DrugSense.org is devoted to informing the public of rational alternatives to the drug war, and helping organize citizens to bring about reforms. Matt Elrod and Mark Greer accepted the award. They have helped generate over 20,635 published letters to the editor, the development of an online archive of over 163,000 drug policy news and opinion pieces, and the creation of numerous internet-based drug policy reform discussion groups.

Mayor Ross C. "Rocky" Anderson of Salt Lake City, UT, received The Richard J. Dennis Drugpeace Award for Outstanding Achievement in the Field of Drug Policy Reform, an award given to individuals who most epitomize "loyal opposition" to drug war extremism. Anderson is the most outspoken and effective elected local official in the US in terms of drug policy reform. Within months of taking office in 2000, he eliminated the costly, ineffective and misleading DARE program as "an absolute fraud on the people of this country." Since then he has continued to innovate: police in Salt Lake City now receive harm reduction trainings. In partnership with numerous drug policy reform groups, Anderson recently hosted the first comprehensive conference on harm reduction and methamphetamine.

For more information on the DPA and its activities and online photos from the conference, visit www.drugpolicy.org.