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Jessica Janecek
jj188@humboldt.edu

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SUNSHINE CERECEDA Back-to-lander Kid Steps into the Sun

Jessica Janecek



The first person interviewed for the Humboldt Cannabis Oral History Project, Sunshine Cereceda, was raised in southern Humboldt by back-to-lander parents, enjoying what she paints as an idyllic childhood. The early 1980s of her youth were filled by playing in the woods, sleeping outdoors, helping neighbors, and potlucking. She fondly remembers living in a house with neither electricity nor hot water. In school, parents in the community were her teachers who, Sunshine recalls, “encouraged us to grow spiritually” and become self-reliant.

Like other southern Humboldt children who were exposed to cannabis cultivation young, Sunshine reports becoming aware of the healing aspects of cannabis while still a kid. She witnessed firsthand how her mother, after smoking a joint, found relief and peace. She also came to understand that marijuana cultivation helped pay bills. Sunshine grew her first marijuana plant as a teenager to pay the tuition required at Petrolia High School, then a boarding school of thirteen students. With that first plant, she took up a practice widely shared in SoHum. Evidence of cultivation stood in plain sight. It was

common to see a cannabis plant in front of someone’s home, she recalls, there for everyone to see.

Sunshine remembers cannabis cultivation in her youth as small scale, even subsistence level, a way to pay bills in a remote area offering few opportunities for gainful legal employment. By the end the 1980s, however, cannabis cultivation had transformed from a home-grown and self-sufficient interest to a large-scale commercial endeavor. Before commercial cannabis, “people were living on food stamps,” she recalls. “Then when people started figuring out this would be a cash crop for them, people started to up their production.”

The increased scale of cultivation was accompanied by an expanded cohort of growers in southern Humboldt. “We were very open,” Sunshine says, “and I think that’s what made it inviting... With very little knowledge, they could become

a grower because we were a community.” As the number of pot fields and people working in them multiplied, legal surveillance began to creep in, Sunshine remembers. The Campaign Against Marijuana Planting (CAMP), a multi-agency law enforcement task force launched in 1983, aimed to eradicate illegal cannabis

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Above: The Sunboldt Grown logo was made by a local artist.

Right: Sunshine gets some quality time her plants in southern Humboldt.



farms across California. One area consumed most of CAMP's energies: the Emerald Triangle, the tripartite heart of cannabis cultivation consisting of Humboldt, Mendocino, and Trinity counties.

A feature of the 1980s war on drugs, CAMP is notorious in southern Humboldt for its heavy handedness. In response to increasingly frequent raids, community members would "go out there and record what CAMP was doing because there were young families that were being terrorized," according to Sunshine. Governmental surveillance did little to stymie the flowering industry. The lure of large profits attracted locals and a stream of new folks to large-scale pot farming. The menace of helicopters coupled with the influx of money caused suspicion and stress, she says, and sometimes brought violence within the community.

Sunshine recalls how this atmosphere affected her: "It was difficult for me to really love the herb and love what I did because it could be taken away and taken away in such a violent kind of way." Still, she and so many others in southern Humboldt carried on growing. Heavier surveillance spurred Sunshine to change cultivation sites every few years. "If you stayed in one place for too long, you'd get too comfortable," she says. "And if you got too comfortable, you'd make mistakes."

In addition to rotating sites, Sunshine developed new

tactics in what became known as "guerilla growing." Guerilla growing refers to the practice of hiding plants deep in forests—for instance, in the canopies of redwoods or in the shadow of manzanitas—hidden from the searching eyes of law enforcement.

Surveillance drove many farmers out of open fields and into the shade, giving rise to "diesel dope growing." Diesel dope refers to growing cannabis in the hills, generally in large shipping containers using bags of potting soil, fertilizer, and artificial light. As Sunshine came across this scene, she found it to be ugly with substantial waste.

The passage in 1996 of California Proposition 215 ushered in the era of medical marijuana, bringing newfound awareness of the plant's homeopathic properties. Sunshine began exploring the creative and healing aspects of cannabis and turned inward to "look more deeply at the mental constructs that I had around me from growing up during prohibition." Other benefits came with Prop 215. Sunshine contends it helped single mothers, who turned to cannabis cultivation when partners failed to pay child support, and suggests a broader empowerment of women in weed. "We realized more openly that it was a medicine, women started to do a lot of medicine making," she says. "Also, women were able to leave bad marriages



High and Dry:

Showing her farm to HSU Geography majors Jessica Janecek (left) and Belen Brashiers (right), Sunshine (center) explains the intricacies of outdoor dry farming (photo by Matthew Derrick).

quantities of marijuana, prices dropped precipitously, ultimately squeezing out many old-timer craft farmers.

Eventually deciding to attend Humboldt State University, Sunshine soon was introduced to a new community: indoor growers. She discovered that indoor growing, thanks to 215, was flourishing in Arcata and other larger settlements of northern Humboldt. Indoor grows became common practice as yet another way to outmaneuver detection by agents of the law. Sunshine left Arcata, returning to southern Humboldt, when serious discussions of state legalization were resumed. The looming end of prohibition fueled her desire to operate a sustainable farm, tell her story, share her message.

and grow and support their families.” Yet, as Prop 215 was only partial legalization, those same mothers lived in fear, knowing that, if caught growing marijuana, state authorities could take away their children.

Though only partial, the legalization signaled by Prop 215 brought a number of changes to the industry in southern Humboldt. Many farmers returned to growing in the sun. People like Sunshine who came of age under surveillance, however, were cautious: “For those of us who lived during the darkest times

*For those of us who
lived during
the darkest times
of CAMP, we were
the last people
to put our plants
in the sun.*

In 2016, the citizens of California voted in favor Proposition 64, thereby legalizing the use and possession of recreational marijuana for those above the age of 21. The shifting legal landscape again

spelled dramatic change for Humboldt’s cannabis industry. Faced with the realities of commercial cannabis, farmers have become more professional. For Sunshine, legalization has allowed her to plan a business, develop a genetics line, create a brand, and roll out a product line. She belongs to a new class of professional growers who face new challenges brought on with the end of prohibition. The competition that comes with a legal market may be stressful and a

source of its own anxieties. But, as Sunshine attests, it sure beats the past fears for oneself, one’s livelihood, family, or community.

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Drug War Prisoner: Pictured bottom right, a younger John smiles prior to serving time.

how much you could grow. It was such a grey area. I think I started growing 10 plants and just really fell back in love with it.

GESA: *When did you realize you wanted a legal farm?*

John: I woke up in the morning to a Blackhawk helicopter sitting a hundred feet away over my house. The whole house, all the windows were rattling... Minutes later I called my third-party compliance person. I said, “You know what? Sign me up because I can’t put my friends or my family or myself through this again.”

GESA: *What is it like being a legal cannabis farmer in Humboldt?*

John: At first, it was very strange... It’s easier for me to share about my life and what I’ve done in the past because I’ve already been in trouble. Media has had a hard time talking and getting the truth out of other farmers because they’re so fearful of what has happened in the past... I think this community relies on me a little bit to really be able to share my story and in turn, share their story. Because when I look back at it, the federal government was trying to make an example out of somebody. Unfortunately, it was me and my best friend. But it could have been almost any one of the people that I grew up with. They know that and I know that, and it didn’t slow anybody down.

GESA: *Would you change anything?*

John: The journey’s been long, amazing. I really wouldn’t trade it for the world because we all have our own individual stories and our own journeys that we created. Looking back on it, it’s just part of my journey and part of my story. I love to share it with people because it really bonds me with people that otherwise it might not, might not have that bond with.

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Today, fully legal in commercial cannabis, Sunshine pours herself into building a distinctive brand, Sunboldt Grown. She has operated, under the Sunboldt Grown moniker, her own breeding program since 2015. Since legalization, she has created a unique product line that includes cannabis strains such as “Loopy Fruit” and “Wanderlust.” For the past few years, Sunshine has been collaborating with a hash maker to produce bubble hash, a cannabis concentrate made from the trichomes that are separated from the bud of the plant through a lengthy process using ice water as a solvent to remove resin heads.

Sunshine, along with Sunboldt Grown, is recognized for being organic and for open-field

cultivation that relies on dry-farming techniques, meaning no water and minimal fertilizer. Sunshine plunks the plants in the earth, maybe bathing them as babies, but thereafter ceasing all watering. She lets the minerals within the soil, the sun, and groundwater do the brunt of the work.

Sunshine is often called a do-nothing farmer for her innovative and sustainable practices. But any observer of the passion and effort poured into the herb can attest that Sunshine is far from a do-nothing farmer. Hearing the story of her long journey, which is far from finished, we learn not only about Sunshine Cereceda, but also gain insight into the dynamics of Humboldt’s ever-changing cannabis industry as well as shifting contours of local culture.