

Healing Church believers flout federal law as they smoke cannabis in Providence park

By Rebecca Ellis

The Betsy Amanda Lehman '77 Memorial Award for Excellence in Journalism

Anne Armstrong, 58, knows exactly how many joints she has smoked at Providence's Roger Williams National Memorial — 153, all rolled with “kosher” marijuana harvested in the backyard of her West Greenwich home.

As “deaconess” to The Healing Church, a cannabis-centered Catholic sect that boasts about a dozen members, Armstrong believes smoking in the park is a religious obligation, the equivalent to a sip of wine at Communion.

Anointing members with hashish-infused oil and blowing a shofar so it billows marijuana smoke are, likewise, ceremonial duties. (It should be noted that Armstrong refuses to use the word marijuana, which she calls racist slang. She prefers to refer to the plant as cannabis, spice, or hemp.)

When Armstrong and the church's “canon,” Alan Gordon, 48, conducted their first publicized service in May 2015, reporters swarmed around the new sect that dared flaunt its joints so publicly on federal land. The Journal and WLNE-TV alerted the public of the church's plan to worship at the memorial and local channels sent film crews to cover the ceremony. According to news reports from the time, 10 park officers were stationed at the .008-square-mile site for the event.

When the ceremony finished with a few fines and no arrests, the coverage of the church faded, as did the park's need for law enforcement.

But in the three years since the church first lit up on government property, members have only become more determined to make themselves a staple of the park's ecosystem, in spite of increased risk. After police seized 12 pounds of cannabis and 59 marijuana plants from Armstrong and Gordon's home in July 2016, each service put the pair in jeopardy of receiving a bail violation and being sent to jail. Armstrong's charges were dismissed last month, but Gordon's are still pending.

Nevertheless, approximately once a week — Saturday at 4:20 p.m. is their preferred day and time — Armstrong and Gordon arrive at the park, often with a congregation member or two in tow. The duo alternates between scripture and speeches, book-ending each service by taking a hit from a joint and releasing the smoke through their respective shofars.

Though the state has decriminalized marijuana possession of under an ounce, the park is federal property, meaning church members flout the Controlled Substance Act with each service. But members say their religion requires them to smoke near the park's historical well, a "sacred spot" they believe is prophesied in the Bible's Book of Revelation as the place where the Tree of Life will "be given back to mankind."

Armstrong equates the church's park pilgrimages to Jews praying at the Western Wall or Muslims traveling to Mecca.

From day to day, it is the park's rangers who keep an eye on the memorial. However, the rangers have no law enforcement powers, which is why they "don't step in" when The Healing Church conducts its services, according to John McNiff, one of the rangers employed at the memorial.

Instead, Meghan Kish, the National Park Service superintendent for the site, says that, "like any other property owner," the rangers are supposed to alert the Providence police if they see illegal activity.

But Armstrong says the Providence police have only come into the park three times since her first service of note, a number she views as a victory in her battle for unrestrained religious expression on park grounds. "We've won," she says.

Toting a handmade "hemp staff," her hair held back by a black and green, cannabis-patterned kerchief, Armstrong is difficult to miss entering the park. McNiff says he spots Armstrong and Gordon several times each month, usually bearing a banner of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the patron saint of Mexico.

As an interpretive ranger, McNiff is responsible for educating the park's visitors on the importance of Roger Williams, Rhode Island's founder. But if he or another ranger notices The Healing Church on park grounds, he says they will go outside "to keep an eye on things."

McNiff says he doesn't know if cannabis is always present at the services. "It's not like they — well, they do put up banners — but it's not like they literally advertise that this is what we're doing," he says.

Armstrong insists the church is "not sneaky." Almost every service involves shofars trumpeting cannabis smoke — though, if children are present, the church will stick to using "holy anointing oil" infused with cinnamon, cardamom and, of course, cannabis.

The Healing Church believes it has a right to host services in the park on First Amendment grounds and therefore prefers that services be as by-the-book as possible. When the church wants to host a larger ceremony, it sends a request to

the Park Service for a First Amendment Permit, which allows groups of 25 or more to gather on federal land. The Park Service has accepted all of the church's requests to hold a service — though, Kish notes, there has never actually been a ceremony with 25 people in attendance.

“The Healing Church continues to apply for First Amendment right permits, and we work with them on those permits,” Kish said. “Though we do not permit any illegal activity.”

Each permit comes with a cover letter instructing the applicant to follow all federal laws.

After Armstrong was granted a permit for her most recent service, on Nov. 4, she wrote an email to the permit coordinator saying that the church's practices include anointing members with a recipe containing cannabis extract. Because she wasn't ticketed at the event, Armstrong concluded that “federal policy has finally changed.”

A YouTube video uploaded from the night, gleefully titled “Feds Allow Cannabis on Baby, at Park Anointing Ceremony,” purports to show two park rangers watching Armstrong “anoint” a baby with cannabis, though the quality of the video makes that impossible to verify. At the end of the video, the words “We Won!” flash in bold green letters.

Church members aren't always as direct with the park's authorities. Members sometimes sit in a car and fill their lungs with smoke before running down to the well to release the vapor. But Armstrong says any furtiveness is solely “out of deference” to the rangers, whose roles as park arbiters have made them unwitting bystanders in the Church's First Amendment battle — an uneasy contrast with their official role of instructing visitors on the park's message of religious tolerance.

Employed at the park for more than 20 years, McNiff is well-versed in the memorial's founding message.

“This is the place where real religious freedom for everybody in the country started,” says McNiff. “I believe that the members of The Healing Church feel that it is appropriate for them to come here because of the reason that the park exists.”

Though The Healing Church's reverence of cannabis makes it an easy target for skepticism, legal experts say the courts have yet to provide a singular definition for religion, making it difficult to say that one belief system is more deserving of First Amendment protections than another.

“You would think after 220 years of having a First Amendment that gives protection to religion, we’d have some idea of what religion is, but that turns out not to be the case,” says Jared Goldstein, professor of law at Roger Williams University School of Law. Instead, most courts look to measure the sincerity of a person’s belief when deciding if their right to religious freedom has been violated. “All that we can decide legally is whether people sincerely believe the things that they say, but they can’t decide whether a religious claim is true.”

Kara Hoopis Manosh, the attorney who represented Armstrong against the state’s charges, says it’s obvious that members of the congregation believe what they preach.

“This is genuine, sincere, longstanding, comprehensive belief that cannabis is the Tree of Life as referenced in the Bible,” she says. “They’ve done extensive writings and teachings on that topic.”

But, Goldstein says, sect members can still be prosecuted for ceremonially smoking marijuana if the government can show it has a “compelling interest in enforcing its drug laws.”

When it comes to balancing religious rights with legal obligations, McNiff says, “there is no easy answer.” However, “if there’s some violation of federal law, then things have to be done.”

But after nearly three years of conducting ceremonies on federal land, Gordon says there’s a “sense that they’re not going to stop us.”

Which, to members of The Healing Church, is just as well. When asked if she would ever consider holding services elsewhere, Armstrong’s answer never varies.

“We can’t have those services somewhere else — no getting around it,” she says. “That’s our religion.”