

## VPA Contest 2021

THE ROANOKE TIMES

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# I got paid to shop for weed

By Dan Casey

Monday, Donna and I celebrated 35 years of milk, honey and extraordinary marital bliss – and every long-hitched couple knows exactly what I mean. But our wedding anniversary wasn't the only recent red-letter day in the Casey household. Saturday was another.

That afternoon, the U.S. Postal Service delivered my medical marijuana card from the Virginia Board of Pharmacy. Yippee! The arrival meant it's now legal for me to buy wacky tobacky in the Old Dominion.

If you've been following this toke-by-toke saga, getting that card was no small hassle. First, I had to get a prescription from a licensed health professional. My own physicians here in Roanoke declined, with some uncomfortable chuckles.

But there's always more than one way to roll a doobie, right? A friend in Blacksburg helped me find a more broadminded teledoc in Northern Virginia. And on Aug. 9, that croaker emailed me a Certification for the Use of Cannabis Products – following a two-minute phone consultation that cost only \$135.

The document allowed me to apply with the Board of Pharmacy as a "registered patient." (Application fee: \$50). The board had all the docs it needed by Aug. 12.

The BOP cautions that registered patients should allow up to 30 business days for their applications to be evaluated. That's because the agency is overwhelmed with weed applications right now. The "business days" fine print stretched the waiting period out until Sept. 24. But they approved it after 23 business days, on Sept. 15.

The buzzkill was, the BOP said I could expect to wait up to 21 additional business days for delivery – or until Oct. 15. For whatever reason, mine arrived 13 calendar days earlier. And that left my Blacksburg buddy envious. He was green as a sativa bud, because he applied before me and he's still doesn't have his card.

Anyway, Tuesday was the big shopping day in Salem, which is the location of the Roanoke Valley's only (so far) medical marijuana dispensary.

It's called RISE Salem. It's directly across West Main Street from the office of The Salem Times-Register, which must be quite a convenience for its journalists. (By the way, RISE allows one unlicensed adult to accompany license holders on shopping forays.)

I invited my Blacksburg friend, but he had an important business meeting with an electrical contractor that morning. So instead, another pal came along on the adventure. His name is Gary Hunt and he's a character.

You may recall a tale I told long ago about Hunt's first pet, growing up as the son of an Army sergeant in post-World War II Europe. The dog was a German shepherd. Its previous owner, Hunt swears, was chap named Adolf Hitler. (It's a long story.)

Anyway, he's a resolute teetotaler – an occasional bottle of Coca-Cola is the most mind-altering substance that ever crosses Hunt's lips. He's not wholly inexperienced with the Devil's Lettuce, mind you. But the last time Gary partook of pot, Richard Nixon was president.

That made him an ideal designated driver – just in case my zeal for journalistic research got the best of me in the RISE parking lot after I'd left the store with the goodies.

The security setup at RISE is interesting. The front door opens into a tiny foyer, which sports another set of locked glass doors one must pass through to get into the store's lobby. It's kind of like the airlocks you see on space ships in science-fiction movies.

On the foyer's right, there's a small window. Inside it was a masked clerk sitting at a computer. From behind that mask, he looked impressed by my QAnon hat.

He photographed the teledoc's certification, along with my driver's license and medical marijuana card, and entered a bunch of information into the computer. Then he pressed a button that released the electronic lock on the lobby door.

Hunt and I were in!

"I never thought I'd live to see the day of legal marijuana stores in Virginia," Hunt quipped.

We entered a modernly appointed room I'd guess was 35-feet or so square. If it reminds you of a lobby at a Bank of Floyd branch, that's no coincidence. That's what the place used to be, before Virginia's medical marijuana barons took it over.

On RISE's current "medical marijuana menu" are eight different varieties of bud, in black plastic containers with locking lids. The current "sale" price for 3.5 grams is \$55.25. The regular price is \$65.

They also sell pre-rolled marijuana joints for \$19 each, plus various-sized marijuana vape cartridges (\$45-\$80), a "concentrate" that looks like hashish for \$90 a gram, and tinctures at \$70 for 30 milliliters. Their cheapest THC-infused gummies were \$50 for a 10-pack.

For truly adventurous clientele, they also sell THC suppositories. I didn't bother to check out the price.

Every product containing THC is behind the counters, and you won't get your grubby hands on it until you've forked over your money – cash only. From this

we can conclude that RISE is probably the most shoplifter-proof retail store in Western Virginia.

We left with 3.5 grams of "Jack Frost," a sativa strain; 3.5 grams of "Crescendo," an indica-sativa hybrid; and one 10-pack of gummies. Those items totalled out at \$160 – and as medicine, they're tax-free.

I also bought six premade cones manufactured in India from French cigarette paper for \$2.11, including sales tax.

RISE also sells more expensive marijuana-use implements, such as electronic vaping gizmos. Those strike me kind of as 21st-century versions of the 1980s bongos with which I'm more familiar. They range up to \$420, no kidding.

One of the clerks behind the counter told me she used to work as a pharmacy technician at Walgreens, but she burned out at the drugstore chain. I reckon working at RISE is much more chill, or chilly, or chillier (as you can see, I'm still trying to get up to speed on modern pot slang).

The "sale" price of buds at RISE – \$442 per ounce, with zilch quantity discounts – can be a little off-putting. Especially compared to some California outlets.

One that I found online was for a company called LA Wonderland. Its price on pre-rolled joints is 3 for \$10. In California, ounces of weed, at roughly the same potency RISE sells, are priced as low as \$90. But you can't mail-order weed from other states. That's still illegal.

I broached the price issue to the Virginia Medical Cannabis Coalition, the pro medical-pot lobbying group. Its spokesman asked not to be identified by name.

Virginia's medical pot program, he argued, is just getting off the ground, while California legalized medical weed many years ago, and even later, retail sales of recreational weed. (Rec weed is coming to Virginia, but that may take as many as three years.)

Virginia's medical program is also the most heavily regulated in the nation, he added. And, Virginia has been selling the flower for only 25 days; and all of it product must be grown indoors – unlike California, where outdoor grows are everywhere. So it's an apples-to-oranges comparison.

And I guess all the above explains why, after spending my hard-earned money on the doctor's note, plus the application fee, plus the weed and gummies and cones, all I've got to show for my \$347.11 investment is 7 grams of flower and 10 gummies.

All my friends are giggling, "Yeah, but the paper will reimburse you, correct?"

I suppose if I pitched a fit about it, the bosses might. But then, they'd be within their rights to demand I turn the product over the company. And alas ... not all of that remains.

Either way, the newspaper paid me salary to shop for pot.

Who else can make that claim?

THE ROANOKE TIMES

NOV. 16, 2021

## They fought city hall - and a tree in Highland Park won

By Dan Casey

Thanksgiving's barely nine days away, and this year, Christmas falls exactly 30 days later. Despite those looming holidays, as of Monday morning, the city of Roanoke has yet to procure a worthy tree for its big annual tree-lighting ceremony at Wells Fargo Plaza.

Usually, the downtown holiday icon is donated by a generous citizen, and the switch for its decorations gets flipped as part of the Dickens of a Christmas celebration. But so far this year, nobody has offered an appropriate Christmas tree, said Michael Clark, the city's director of Parks and Recreation.

That's OK, too, because a farsighted former city forester prepared for exactly such a contingency about 20 years ago. Dan Henry, who's now retired, shrewdly planted a couple of Norway spruce saplings in Highland Park just in case city hall ever found itself in a Christmas-tree-finding pinch.

Apparently, though, Henry failed to anticipate that as the planted spruce inched skyward over two decades, fondness for it would grow among tree-hugging residents of Roanoke's Old Southwest neighborhood. That's what happened.

And then one day last week, a crew of city workers showed up to survey the spruce in question, which stands on the park's Walnut Avenue side. Alert neighbors quickly learned the tree would be sacrificed for the holiday season.

From there, word spread like a pine needles in a stiff wind.

The first person to post about the outrage on Facebook was Mary Etta Rice-Way, who lives near the Old Southwest Park.

And that led to to an online petition on Change.org titled "Stop Highland Park Tree from being Roanoke's Christmas Tree."

It was initiated Sunday by Jane Gabrielle McCadden, a well-known local artist, musician and activist. On Change.org she penned two spare sentences about the controversy and included a photo of the spruce.

"Roanoke City continues with cutting a tree for the city's Christmas tree. This time they will decimate our tree canopy by cutting down a tree from Highland Park!" she posted.

By Monday morning, when I learned of the petition, 152 people had signed it. By 1:30 p.m., the number had grown to 169. By 5 p.m. it had garnered 173 John Hancocks. And some signers left pointed comments.

"Cutting down trees for this is an offense against nature," Cynthia Brown wrote in one.

"I think the tree should remain where it's at so people can see the beauty for years to come not just a month at the most," Carol Bowes chimed.

"Ridiculous to cut down a beautiful tree, in a park of all places, for this reason," Matthew Togo added.

Members of the Roanoke City Council began getting some unhappy emails. One was from Bill McClure, who's lived across Walnut Avenue from Highland Park for the past 27 years. He told me his kids, who are now adults, grew up watching the spruce grow.

McClure sent an email to all city council members Sunday night. Here's a passage:

"We spend money on artwork, and other endeavors in the city, but why not keep a natural piece of art, keep our tree canopy, and BUY a tree like from a sustainable tree farm, and not cut a neighborhood natural wonder?" McClure wrote to each council member Sunday.

Then a series of amazing events occurred.

McClure said his email elicited quick and positive replies from Councilman Joe Cobb and Vice Mayor Trish White-Boyd.

Cobb's reply, which arrived in McClure's inbox Monday before 10:30 a.m., noted that over the weekend Cobb brought the matter to the attention of City Manager Bob Cowell.

Cowell told Cobb that in light of the objections raised, "I have instructed the Parks Department to determine if an acceptable tree may be purchased," if a suitable donation could not be found. Cowell even authorized spending up to \$2,000 on the tree.

"The tree in the park will not be removed if it can be avoided by either finding an acceptable tree here in the City or by purchasing one," he wrote to Cobb.

By Monday afternoon, employees in Parks and Recreation had located a 30-plus foot tall Norway spruce that was in somebody's yard in Vinton. (Spruces and firs are the most desirable varieties, Clark explained, because the branches are strong enough to hold all the decorations.)

"We had looked at that tree a couple of years ago, but the house was for sale at that time," Clark told me. The property has since sold, and the current owner agreed to donate the tree.

"Removal and transportation will take place a week from today," Clark wrote in a Monday afternoon email.

All of the above happened so fast that Jane Gabrielle McCadden, who launched the Change.org petition Sunday, was unaware of the successful resolution by the time I got hold of her Monday afternoon.

"You're kidding!" she said when I told her the news. "It's so nice to get a quick success, once in awhile. This was a two-day effort and something happened. I'm just so grateful."

The tree-lighting ceremony at Wells Fargo Plaza begins at 5:30 p.m. Dec. 3. The light switch for the tree gets flipped at 6:20. The public is invited.

And now you know the rest of the story – about how a preserve-the-tree petition saved the Highland Park spruce from a gang of holiday choppers.

I guess you can fight city hall, eh?

THE ROANOKE TIMES

JUNE 24, 2021

## Bedford County church's QAnon event and upcoming militia 'muster' stoke questions

By Dan Casey

What's going on with our neighbor to the east, Bedford County? Has someone slipped a nefarious substance into the water supply that hijacks minds and transports victims to the alternate universe?

Those questions are worth raising for a couple of reasons. One's an event that occurred May 22. Another is happening Saturday in Montvale.

The first was touted in a half-page ad in a May edition of the weekly Bedford Bulletin.

"Wake Up Sleepy Church!" proclaimed the headline, which was promoting a free showing of a three-hour video, "Fall of the Cabal," at Apple Valley Community Church, which is near Peaks of Otter.

"Arise from your stupor," the ad continues. "Open your bleary eyes. Enlighten your confused minds. EDUCATE YOURSELF."

I called the listed phone number and spoke with a helpful woman who took my reservation for the event. I didn't make it, though, because the weather that Saturday afternoon was far too nice to waste three hours indoors watching anything.

Then I found the whole "documentary" on YouTube. I watched the first 30 minutes, then skipped around for another 15 or so. It doesn't document much, aside from lunacy.

It's a QAnon indoctrination video, produced by Dutch "researcher" Janet Ossebaard, whose other work includes investigation of crop circles. And just so there's no mistake about the film's theme, the church's ad featured a big, fat "Q" in the upper left-hand corner, superimposed over a pair of old-style skeleton keys.

More or less, "Fall of the Cabal" unifies all of history's best crackpot conspiracies. We're talking the illuminati, freemasonry, Egypt's pyramids and far, far more, all tied into a not-exactly-tidy theory of world domination and slavery.

Naturally, it includes a couple of well-worn anti-Semitic tropes, such as the Rothschilds and George Soros. The Bedford Bulletin ad specifically cited those, along with the Rockefellers.

Stewed in such fearful juices, weak minds might indeed conclude that Earth is composed of shape-shifting aliens who kidnap, torture and sacrifice infants before ritually drinking their blood. And that former President Donald Trump was sent to save us from that nightmare.

That's purely my take on "Fall of the Cabal," however. What about Apple Valley Community Church's? After the showing, I called the church five times in an effort to get its perspective, and left multiple voicemail messages. Nobody called back.

Fortunately, Apple Valley's May 22 Facebook post features a robust and rollicking defense of QAnon. According to that, "Q" is actually a group of more than 800 military intelligence analysts who advise the president, and are sending signals to the general populace to awaken them to "the truth."

Here's an illuminating passage from that 781-word screed:

"Are you aware that the FBI, CIA and other intelligence agencies have become so corrupt that they employ hundreds of journalists throughout the four major media organizations, including CNN, the Huffington Post, NBC, Fox News, The New York Times and Washington Post? How could you not know that intelligence agencies disseminate disinformation and control mainstream media story lines and narratives?"

In that case, where my FBI and CIA propaganda checks? I could use that money.

Of course, it's also possible that the FBI isn't paying reporters and that Bedford's nascent QAnon movement was caused by something weird in the water that's warped a few psyches.

The other questionable event happens Saturday at Montvale Park, just a stone's throw off U.S. 460. There, the Bedford Militia Inc. will hold its 2021 muster beginning at 9:30 in the morning. A flyer the militia put out urges people to bring unloaded semi-automatic rifles. AR-15-type rifles are preferred, the flyer notes.

Members of the militia I spoke to Wednesday disclaimed any connection whatsoever to Apple Valley Community Church or QAnon.

The Bedford Militia organized in February 2020 with an event that drew "700-plus," said militia Commander Jon Falls. And on May 26, 2020, the Bedford County Board of Supervisors voted 5-2 in favor of a resolution recognizing the organization.

Specifically, it noted the county government has no authority over the militia.

Supervisor John Sharp, who chaired the board last year and voted to recognize the militia, told me that its formation was "a chess move" in preparation for potential lawsuits against the state or federal government.

By some legal principle I don't quite follow, that official recognition may provide its members "legal standing" in future lawsuits, Sharp explained.

As you may recall, some (but not all) election lawsuits following Trump's 2020 loss were dismissed by judges who ruled the plaintiffs lacked standing – or the legal right – to sue. (Others post-election lawsuits were rejected on the merits of their claims.)

"It may – and I emphasize may – give legal standing to challenge unconstitutional restrictions," Sharp told me.

Falls, who earns his living as a welder, declined to tell me the precise number of members in his group.

"We have, you know, a number of people," he said. "I don't want to say, exactly. But we have 50-plus people in the organization."

The militia, Falls added, performs search-and-rescue functions, road clearing, delivers food to needy people and helps elderly residents repair their homes.

"But in the flyer you're asking people to bring unloaded AR15s," I noted.

"That's also a function of the militia," Falls replied. "We're a multifaceted organization."

I asked him which civilian authority the militia answered to. That's a relevant question, considering Article I, Section 13 of Virginia's constitution. Here is that in its entirety:

"A well regulated militia, composed of the body of the people, trained to arms, is the proper, natural, and safe defense of a free state, therefore, the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed; that standing armies, in time of peace, should be avoided as dangerous to liberty; and that in all cases the military should be under strict subordination to, and governed by, the civil power."

Falls replied: "We don't really answer to a civilian authority ... We're rebuilding an institution [the militia] that should never have fallen out of existence in the United States."

I'm not sure Virginia Attorney General Mark Herring looks at it that way, however. When I asked his spokeswoman, Charlotte Gomer, about the legality of the Bedford Militia, she replied:

"Attorney General Herring has been clear on the threat these untrained, unorganized, and unaccountable so-called militias could pose to communities in the Commonwealth. Last month, he sent a letter to Congress calling for more federal resources to combat the threat of militia extremism in Virginia and around the country.

"While the Bedford County Board of Supervisors has the right to express their opinions, it should seriously consider the risks and negative consequences of recognizing and condoning a group of armed, untrained persons that could violate the law by purporting to have law enforcement authority."

It sounds like Herring's wondering whether there's something weird in Bedford's water, too.

Perhaps the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality should investigate!