

WTE column of June 6, 2015. Editor's headline: "Pot prohibition doesn't work"

Casper Star Tribune of same date: "The time has come to correct a mistake"

A book, "Midnight in Siberia," awaits on my nightstand, on loan from a friend. Authored by former NPR Moscow bureau chief David Greene, it's a travelogue cum cultural exchange as David, sometimes with spouse Rose, sometimes with a Russian acquaintance or adviser, criss-crosses Russia by train. My friend, who is intimately familiar with Russian train travel, annotated the text with his own observations, which makes the reading doubly pleasurable.

Just now a particular Greene experience comes to mind. David and Rose are held up at the train station by a queue of Russians who wait to deposit their "purses, backpacks, luggage, wallets, belts, and jewelry" on the conveyor belt of a security checkpoint. Confounded, the Greenes note that "not a single police officer or railway employee or *vokzal* staff member is manning this security post." In fact, half the people are setting off the metal-detector alarm as they pass through; still, "nobody comes to stop them."

The line moves at a snail's pace, comments David as he puts his luggage on the belt. Knowing it won't make any difference, he's nonetheless "going through the process without questioning it." His spouse, however, has "walked around the security checkpoint, ducked under the rope, and [waits] on the other side with a satisfied smile." Of himself, the writer says, "I am more of a wimp about these things and fully expected Rose to be tackled by a Russian security official."

Before you grin to yourself about the herd instinct of late-night travelers in Russia, ask yourself: Would I risk Rose's behavior? We, too, follow the rules of the law, thinking there must be good reasons for them even when it's apparent that that's not the case. Many years ago, a rule may have been someone's mistake; what if the time has come to correct it? The enforcers may have trouble catching on, or they may refuse to catch on. Should that keep us from insisting on change for the better?

Such was my reasoning when I determined to become one of the sponsors of a proposed initiative, the Peggy A. Kelly Wyoming Cannabis Act of 2016, that would legalize marijuana for medical uses and, simultaneously, allow Wyomingites to grow hemp. Sponsored by the Wyoming chapter of NORML, the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws, the initiative seeks to right a decades-old wrong. Unsurprisingly, the sheriffs and chiefs of police of our state have taken an adversarial stance. To Laura Hancock of the Caspar Star Tribune, who published the remarks on May 22, the executive director of their association declared: "We will oppose that initiative." He added that his group plans to "refute some of the absurd ideas they're putting forth"—"they" being NORML, presumably—"as reasons why it should be legalized."

A University of Wyoming poll last year found that 70 percent of Wyomingites support medical marijuana.

Peggy Anne Kelly, after whom the initiative is named, was born in 1945 in Riverton and passed away in Guernsey from complications of terminal cancer in January 2015. Peggy was one of the first women in Wyoming to work as engineer for Burlington Northern Railroad but had to retire after a hazardous-materials incident at work left her with permanent lung injury. The

disability escalated to COPD and carcinoma. Peggy lived long past the time her doctors had projected for her, which she credited to the use of cannabis. She risked everything to obtain the life-giving substance and caused herself extreme anguish but nonetheless imported it from out of state, certain that cannabis was keeping her alive.

Rep. James Byrd, D-Cheyenne, one of our few congressional members of color, is a fellow sponsor; indeed, he was the first to sign on. “It’s the right way to go,” he said of the initiative. He also said he would continue to push for decriminalization in the legislature, though his colleagues have repeatedly shot down his efforts.

Another fellow sponsor is Janet Cunningham, who says she would welcome the opportunity to determine if a doctor’s cannabis prescription might alleviate certain of her ailments. “Prohibition against alcohol didn’t work,” she said. “The War on Drugs didn’t work. Demonizing marijuana as a ‘gateway drug’ is disingenuous. The real gateways are prescription drugs.”

Using marijuana is far less dangerous than self-medicating with alcohol, NORML supporters point out. While some 50,000 people die every year of alcohol poisoning—not counting those who succumb in alcohol-induced car wrecks—and more than 400,000 deaths annually are attributed to tobacco smoking, marijuana is non-toxic and, therefore, cannot possibly produce death by overdose. “We need to keep minors from getting their hands on marijuana, with rules as for tobacco and alcohol. Parents know this,” says Ms. Cunningham. Law Enforcement Against Prohibition (LEAP) agrees. It’s prohibition that tempts illicit use.