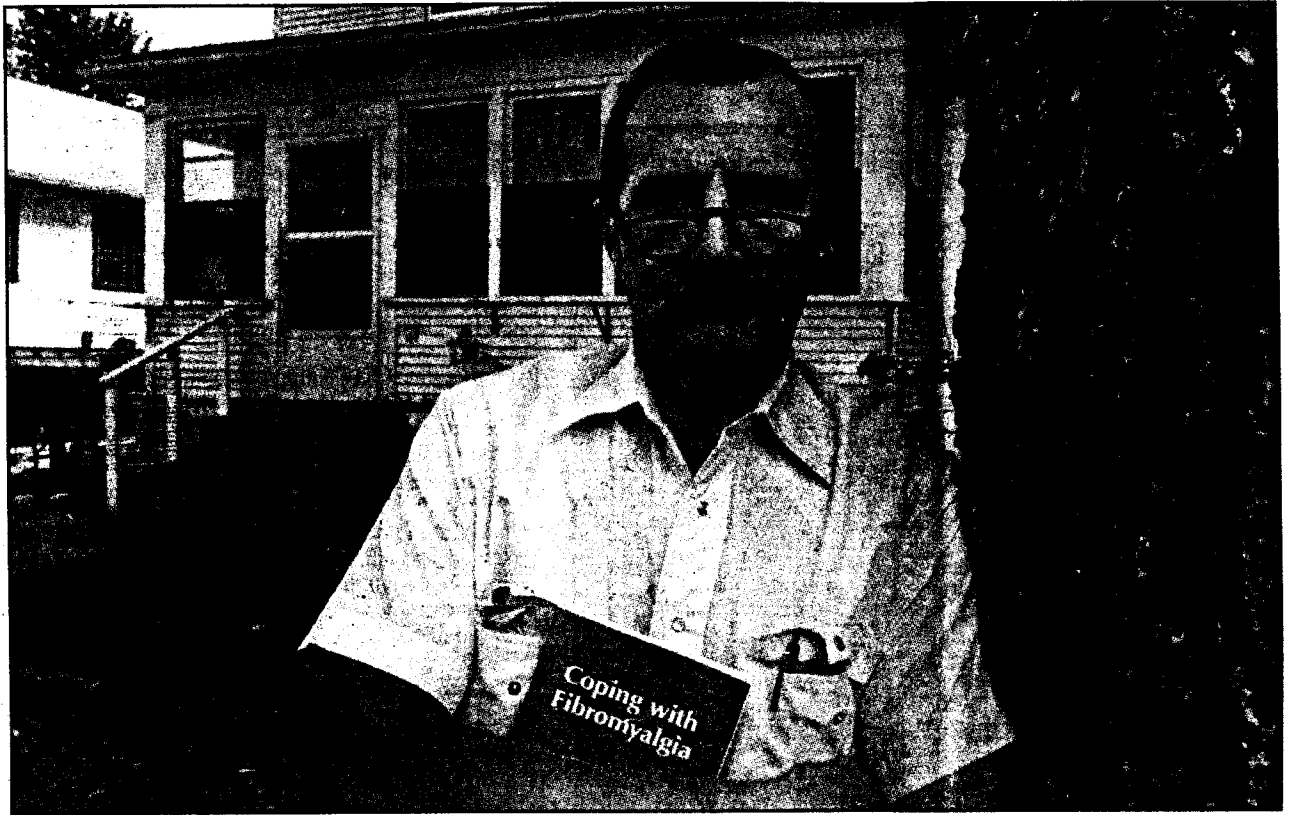


# Looking for relief

## Man faces prison term for using marijuana to ease pain

**"If need be I will do my time, but I don't and can't feel like a criminal because I use a substance that enables me to at least function part-time."**

Allen Helmers



DAN NIERLING / Courier Photo Editor

Allen Helmers of Waterloo faces a prison sentence because he continues to smoke marijuana for medicinal purposes.

### ■ Statewide rally planned for marijuana user's plight.

By **LARRY BALLARD**  
Courier Assistant City Editor

#### WATERLOO

Allen Helmers sits rigidly on cement steps that lead to the front porch of his weathered, white duplex on the city's east side.

Just above his head, a pair of skinny cats lounge behind the screened windows, eyes closed, ears twitching to pick up even the smallest sound from the street.

Helmers adjusts his black reading glasses and shifts his weight uncomfortably. It's a little after 1 p.m., and he's hurting.

"I can't sit like this very long," he says. "Pretty soon, I have to recline or lay down or it starts killing me."

Before he reclines, Helmers, 48, will fill a small pipe with marijuana and inhale deeply. His doctor says it's the only thing that effectively relieves the throbbing pain of fibromyalgia syndrome, which

attacks the body's soft tissue. Neither cause nor cure is known.

Seconds after his fourth "hit" of the day, the pain in Helmers' back and legs will begin to subside, and he can think about something else.

Like spending as much as 10 years in prison.

"If they send me into the system, I'll be one hell of an expensive prisoner," he says. "You know, disabled people have rights, too."

Helmers survived a semi roll-over in 1983 that left him with a broken back. In 1994, he was hit by an uninsured drunken driver while riding his motorcycle, resulting in an ugly mass of purplish zipper scars crisscrossing his lower left leg, where the flesh has been stretched haphazardly over repaired bones.

But six months before the second accident, on a cold February night, police burst into Helmers' house with a search warrant. He says they were looking for powdered methamphetamine, having traced the drug to a man who rented the other half of the duplex.

But the search yielded the 90

grams (about three ounces) of marijuana Helmers had on hand to keep the pain at bay.

"I knew better than to have that much at once," he says. "Anything less than 44 grams would have been a misdemeanor."

Helmers stash cost him two five-year prison sentences and \$1,800 in fines and court costs. The prison terms were suspended, and he was placed on two to five years of supervised probation, which includes periodic urine tests.

"I didn't lie; I told them the (tests) would be dirty," he says. "I wasn't going to stop smoking; I couldn't."

His doctor, W.H. Verduyn of Waterloo, says Helmers' pain does "not seem to respond to the usual medical management."

According to Helmers, more potent, prescribed pain relievers have not only failed, but caused everything from stomach ulcers to impotence and memory loss.

"Marijuana gives me the best relief from the pain and muscle spasms without the debilitating side effects of the other drugs," he says.

It even allows him the mobility to mow lawns for elderly friends and give horseback rides to neighbor kids.

Dr. Verduyn, of Physical & Rehabilitation Associates of NE Iowa Inc., says he knows many patients who use marijuana to reduce chronic pain, with the only side effect being "a significant reduction of the other pain medications."

"It has been known in the medical field, particularly in the area of rehabilitation, that chronic neurogenic pain responds well to the medicinal use of marijuana," he says.

Across the country, the same case has been made for people suffering with AIDS, cancer, glaucoma, epilepsy, multiple sclerosis and other maladies.

But there are only eight people in the United States who can legally smoke marijuana for medical reasons. All were given permission — and are supplied the drug — under a federal program that was shut down by the Bush administration in 1992,

See **MARIJUANA**, page A7

---

# MARIJUANA

---

## **Man faces prison term for using medicinal marijuana**

Continued from page A1

two years before Helmers took a friend's 7-year-old son "for a little ride on the motorcycle."

It was 3:30 p.m., in the 1900 block of Independence Avenue. The woman driving the car that struck them was determined to be legally drunk.

"The bones came spraying out of my leg, and I busted the bottom two vertebrae that still haven't healed," Helmers remembers. "The little kid landed on my lap, he got a couple of stitches.

"We had an angel with us."

Helmert is hoping the angel will be in the Black Hawk County Courthouse Sept. 16. That's when he goes before a judge at a probation revocation hearing. An unfavorable decision will send him to prison.

But even if he's lucky, and probation is continued, he won't stop smoking pot.

"In good conscience, if need be I will do my time, but I don't and can't feel like a criminal because I use a substance that enables me to at least function part-time," he says.

Not surprisingly, Helmers' plight has come to the attention of Iowans for Medical Marijuana, and his story has been posted on the Internet. A lawyer in Philadelphia has reportedly offered his services.

The statewide group has invited Helmers to a rally at the state Capitol on Oct. 6.

If he's not in jail.

"I will battle the best I can, but I know if I'm locked up and deprived of my medicine, I'll go downhill fast," Helmers says. "I can only hope that my suffering might somehow help someone else down the road.

"I'm turning it over to the Lord."