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JOHN CASALI “I Wouldn’t Trade My Journey for the World”

Jessica Janecek
Dr. Matthew Derrick

In 1996, after 3,000 days in prison, John Casali returned to live in his childhood home in southern Humboldt, where he now owns and operates Huckleberry Hill Farms, a legal cannabis estate. Arriving at this place, back at home and happy at home, did not come easy. Hard time and hard work, in prison and after his release, have freed John to live in peace and share his love of cannabis with anybody fortunate enough to visit his gorgeous plot of land in southern Humboldt County.

Included among the fortunate visitors is a GESA gaggle, including one department chair and a couple curious undergraduate researchers-in-becoming, who journeyed out to Huckleberry Hill Farms last fall to record John’s interview for the Humboldt Cannabis Oral History Project. A child of back-to-lander parents, John is a second-generation farmer who, for reasons that will become apparent, requested that his story be recorded without anonymity. He wants his story saved for posterity with his name firmly attached, sharing his experiences with cannabis and how the plant has impacted his life for good.

GESA: How did you become involved in cannabis cultivation?

John: My mother educated me on the cannabis plant and the benefits it brought people who had certain ailments... It was shown to me in the same

respect as a tomato plant or a zucchini plant or a fruit tree or a vine of grapes. And so, for me as a 10-year-old kid following my mother around, I was growing a tomato or I was growing a cannabis plant—it was the same exact thing. And she taught me right off the bat that the more time or the more energy or love put into this plant, the better it would turn out in the end. That’s what makes sun-craft cannabis so special. And that’s what differentiates our product from product that’s grown on commercial larger scale grows in southern California.

GESA: How did your generation compare to your parents’ generation?

John: The more conservative groups like my parents...really didn’t like seeing their children or their generation seeing the effect that this had on us. At that point, it was so addictive, growing the plants and breeding our own strains, that there was really no stopping us. We really just took it to another level. And as that level started to increase, it really started to increase with all of Humboldt County and specifically southern Humboldt County. That’s when enforcement started to get worse. So, the timing of the two created a catastrophe for a lot of us.

GESA: How did you respond to surveillance?

John: We did some really evasive, weird things back then... Most of the community would go into town at

six in the morning during the growing season because when enforcement convoys would show up at your property, it was always at 6-6:30 in the morning. So, we were learning from them the habits that they started to take on, we would counteract those habits by not being at our places, and we would be in town. We were a pretty close community. We would all talk. And once you found out where those enforcement teams were, if they weren't at your place, you were able to go back to your house and go along with your day... And along with that, you would once in a while see some helicopters doing aerial surveillance... It was really just this cat-and-mouse game for all summer long every single day.

GESA: *It must have had some effect on you as a kid.*

John: It was very strange, and it was traumatic for a small kid growing up, now looking back at it, to have been growing up in those kinds of pressure situations. The last thing you wanted to do was come back after school and to find out that you parents were arrested, and you were home now alone because they were in jail for growing cannabis.

GESA: *How did you respond to enforcement?*

John: The stakes continued to get higher and higher as enforcement started to get more and more. You could no longer grow out in the open. Where before you could grow one plant out in the open and it would be a five- or ten-pound plant, now we were forced to grow underneath the manzanita bushes, where we would hollow out all the lower stuff and just leave a small bit of leaves so that an aerial surveillance couldn't see down through those leaves to the cannabis plants. What we looked for was either manzanita or white thorn bushes because those were usually bushes that grew in the sunniest south-facing slopes. The downside about growing underneath the trees or growing underneath



Family Tradition: A second-generation farmer, John gives credit to his mother for teaching him to how to grow.

the bushes was that where I sometimes would get five or ten pounds of plant, now it was an ounce...

GESA: *How did you get caught at 20 years old?*

John: Unfortunately, this old man down the road of this piece of property we bought ended up turning us in...to a BLM agent, who is a [representative of a] federal agency. So, the investigation started off as a federal investigation.

They actually went to our garden sites multiple times throughout that summer and filmed us. They had a bunch of different videos of us and pictures of us. It was August of 1992 when I woke here at my house, where I grew up, and 30 federal agents showed up at six o'clock in the morning. I had a nine-millimeter pointed at my head, brought me into the house and served a search warrant here at this piece of property, and at this other piece of property where my best friend and I were growing cannabis... Understand that these are two kids who were first-time nonviolent offenders, who had never had a speeding ticket, would never hurt anybody in their life. And the feds, "Who are they?" We were just in shock, like, "Oh, we're in trouble?" I was able to go in, post bail, and for the next three years I had to go pretty much every month...to the San Francisco Federal Courthouse building with my best friend.

GESA: *What was the trial like?*

John: After three years, over a hundred people from this community came down to the courthouse. The judge stood up in front of me and my community and said...he would wish for nothing else more than to have given us a year or less, that he thought we were rehabilitable. But because of the law and because his hands were tied, that our brackets were under the mandatory ten years to life. So he felt that giving us ten years was kind of doing the best he could do for us... He gave two of us, you know, ten years in jail.

GESA: What was prison like?

John: You start to get into your own routine in there, and so it's okay for us. But our family and our friends really had to worry about us every day: Are we okay? So, the real crime was against them. I feel very guilty for having put them through that. Fortunately, I had made some pretty good choices while I was going to court that enabled me to fit in pretty easily [in prison] and be accepted into that kind of community.

GESA: What was it like getting out of prison?

John: At the end of the day, we did that time. Unfortunately, my mother passed away while I was in there. So did my stepdad. And so, so I came out...

For most of the interview thus far, in telling his story, John has not shied away from showing emotion, at times laughing, at times on the edge of tears, at times laughing on the edge of tears. However, at this point in the interview, he is suddenly overcome with emotion, breaking into tears. As do I [MAD], pausing before tapping out the remainder of this sentence, recalling this moment in the interview.

John: I came out to this community that for the whole time that I grew up was part of my family. And now they were my family. And so that's what this community in Humboldt County really represents, a tight-knit community that no matter what, we'll be there for you in times of hardship. That's one thing that hasn't changed to this day. It's hard to have something like that happen and leave, because nowhere else in the world that I know is a community like that. When it comes down to it, there's no money, there's no amount of money in the world that can replace family, friends, or community. Humboldt County is rich in ways that they don't even realize, or some of us do realize.

John gathers himself, as do I [MAD], type-typing.

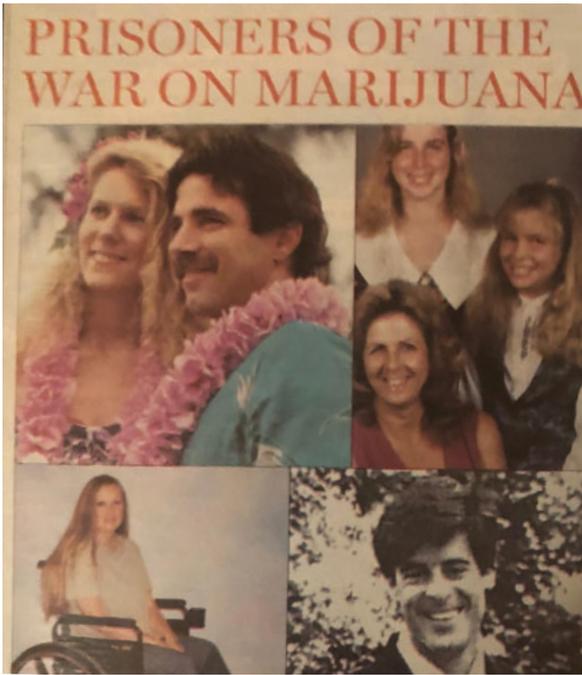
John: They brought this place [his childhood home] back to life. They gave me a second chance at having something special and having a new life. I'll never forget them.



Hanging with Some Kind Buds: John dries out some of his finest foliage.

GESA: What did you do after getting out of prison?

John: That was in 1996. I had five years of probation to do, and so for the first two years I got permission from my probation officer to start a landscaping business with my co-defendant, my best friend that I went to jail with. We were still riding around with each other in a truck. We were doing little lawns in town and finding enjoyment doing that. But then that itch to start to grow cannabis again came back... After I got off probation after two and a half years, I was able to get a 215 script and every different county was different on



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.

SUNSHINE...Continued from Page 46.

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.