

# Seattle Hempfest Grows Up

by Jeremy M. Barker

**D**ominic Holden doesn't strike you as the sort of person who, as the director of Seattle Hempfest, is one of the most influential activists for marijuana law reform in the city if not the country. When I arrived about ten minutes early for our luncheon interview at Café Septième, I introduced myself to three or four middle-aged men in neat shirts with PDAs and cell phones sitting by themselves, assuming that one was Holden. As it turned out, Holden was the young man with the tousled head of hair, wearing a tank top, who walked in about ten minutes late.

Hempfest began in 1991 as a small, one-day exposition at Volunteer Park with only 500 attendees. This year, organizers expect 150,000 people, or more, to pack Myrtle Edwards Park for the free "protestival" on August 21 and 22.

Though Dominic Holden attended the festival from the beginning, he didn't begin volunteering until 1994. In 1998 he took over the recently vacated director post and, "sought to help the event evolve with its political clout and credibility and also just the momentum with just the number of people coming to the event," as he put it. Now he not only works at the festival but serves on the national steering committee for NORML, the National Organization for Reform of Marijuana Law, in addition to campaigning for reform in Seattle.

Considering where the festival has come from, Holden has been highly successful. When it began, it was an outgrowth of Seattle's grunge scene. Early musical headliners were local icons, including 7 Year Bitch. Since then, the musical line-up, which will be appearing on six separate stages this year, has diversified to include not just typical pot-smoker music such as reggae, but trance and techno music, and the headlining act this year is rapper Sir Mix-A-Lot.

As for its political credibility, this year's impressive speaker list not only includes icons like author and activist Ed Rosenthal, but Ethan Nadlemann, the executive director of the Drug Policy Alliance, part of billionaire speculator George Soros' Open Society Institute. "Ethan Nadlemann has never gone to a marijuana law reform rally," said Holden, with more than a hint of pride. "They're typically characterized as radical and unrealistic 'smoke-ins,' and [Nadlemann] didn't feel that was the right venue for such a reputable academic and medical organization." Nadlemann's presence, then, suggests just how far Hempfest has come.

That's because of the increasingly sophisticated nature of their political message. Perhaps the single greatest success Holden can claim is getting Initiative 75, a project he spearheaded, passed last year. I-75 made marijuana a lowest priority offense for the Seattle Police Department. "It's been very effective," said Holden. "We've started to see numbers come back reflecting the practice of SPD ... In 2002, which is the last year we have full data for in which I-75 wasn't in effect, there were 150 marijuana prosecutions. For the period of January 1 through June 1 of 2004, there were 14 people prosecuted, two of which were found guilty."

In fact, for someone who organizes a festival dedicated to an illegal activity, Holden has strong, positive feelings toward the Seattle Police Department. Asked if Hempfest was subject to intense police surveillance, Holden replied, "The police attend in relatively conservative numbers compared to the overall attendance of the event. They're there



**DOMINIC HOLDEN:** Three minutes away from devouring a large pizza.

to make sure the crowd is safe and everyone has a good time."

"We make an extra special effort to support our police officers at the event, and we let people know from the stages, regularly, that police are not our foe, they are our friends," Holden insisted. "They're here to protect us. For the most part, what police do is noble work...and when you're in trouble who are you going to call? A stoner? No, you're going to call a cop. What we're protesting is the marijuana laws that criminalize people, not the individuals who work so hard and are tasked with enforcing those laws."

That's a sign of just how successful Hempfest has been at developing not only its credibility but also a strong and unique link to the greater Seattle community. Despite some growing pains the festival experienced with Belltown businesses when it moved to Myrtle Edwards Park, Hempfest is actually fairly uncontroversial, and Holden

praised the local media coverage as whole, including the mainstream news sources. In short, Hempfest isn't just a gathering of pot-heads anymore—it's a dynamic and exciting festival of art and politics that's helping pave the way for more realistic and humane drug policy. For more information about Hempfest, visit their website at [www.hempfest.org](http://www.hempfest.org). ♦



**WOODY HARRELSON:** at Hempfest 2003.

