

## Prisons, snitches and graveyards

**How much collateral damage will we suffer before we put an end to the war on drugs?**

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Barter Faires, spring and autumn celebrations, sometimes called "gatherings" by counter-culture residents of Northeastern Washington seasonally dot our isolated valleys. People trade "homespun", canning, crafts, old and new clothing, for handmade candles, a winter's supply of squash, keeping the dreams of simple and productive lives alive, and an earth less spoiled by their having lived upon it. And yes, sometimes marijuana and other illegal substances are traded. Only in that regard is it like any other gathering of people - a barter faire is quite unique.

Attracting thousands of people, the faires foster old friendships - one circle of friends take in another, and new friendships root. A lot of folks come to watch the process, voyeurs enjoying the "vibe". The faires last for days at a time, sometimes weeks; the police rarely needed, rarely summoned, but present nonetheless. In the past - in the form of undercover agents but today more commonly with former friends who have "turned", "rolled over" and become "informants" and "snitches" - such police 'friends' set up drug buys, and set off signals to police. Agents blaze into the peaceful valley of encampments. In 4 x 4s careening down hillsides, filling rutted, narrow roads, they make high profile, noisy arrests, leaving behind shrouds of dust, and each year rising levels of resentment and disgust.

Besides a rolling thunderstorm or two, raid-like arrests are usually the only thing that shatters the peace of one of Stevens' or neighboring Ferry County's barter faires. And the mood's gloomy after they've hauled off a "brother" or "sister" for a small marijuana, LSD or mushroom sale. Later, after the "rolling over" - an ounce turns into kilos, and mere possession becomes a tangled conspiracy. A conspiracy charge and prison sentence isn't necessarily based on the drugs a person has in his or her possession, but often large amounts that others might have, or a guess at how much might have been involved - a guess that is made by a law enforcement agent. The only way out is to become a "snitch".

Our community's counterculture survives in a drug-war-zone few give notice to, and as night falls around a hundred campfires and before a backdrop of night-blackened hills, forest and drum sounds, there is talk about the war on the people who choose homegrown bud over the corporate Bud. People are suspicious and afraid that the drug war, not unlike other distinct communities of people, has targeted them long, and targeted them hard. Around those campfires people agonize over the "snitch culture", exhorting the young to avoid betrayal while one by one elders succumb to a prosecutor's demand when they're busted, or they get hauled off to prison. The youth of this counterculture cannot remember "better days" because for them there's always been a drug war - and those that weren't home-schooled learned to "snitch" in DARE class.

Marijuana became the number one cash crop in our county when the drug war heated up twenty to thirty years ago, and today, mostly due to the underground market that prohibition fuels, it's a commodity worth more than gold. Yet we expect people not to trade in such products, even after science judges them "benign" as mood altering substances go. We call any human culture that chooses the Herb over Prozac™ a "Drug Culture" and add to that perplexity the burden of perhaps becoming a "Snitch" culture. And snitch culture has begun to take hold in every community exposed daily to the rewarding of betrayal, and resultant violence shouldn't come as a surprise to anyone.

It's beginning to take a hold in our Colville area now. We experienced a grisly double murder last spring. While local and national newspapers called them "drug-ring" murders, the murders had less to do with drugs, and more about this "snitching" business into which police pull our citizens.

Joshua Schaefer and Nick "Echo" Kaiser laid plans last spring, traveled from their respective homes in Western Washington and Oakland, California to the barter faire north of Colville. Not long after their arrival - they disappeared. They were never entirely found, wild animals having discovered their shot-dead, charred remains inside a Ford Bronco before people did.

Barter Faire 'regulars', Kaiser and Schaefer had both been arrested before, and rather than face decades in prison, each had become an informant for the police. If they had chosen prison, they'd still be alive today-locked up with violent criminals for their nonviolent offenses. Nick would have been looking at a release date of no sooner than 2025 if Steven's County prosecutor Jerry Wetle is correct in his assessment of Kaiser as the "LSD man on the West Coast. The boss of Seattle." Wetle also claims that Joshua Schaefer was associated with what police described as "Rainbow Family drug rings."

The avocation of a snitch is hard to keep secret, and while we do not know the details, John Grange of Portland, Oregon may have been caught in the same trap as Nick, and now Joshua - turn informant or spend most of the rest of your life in prison. He'd heard the rumors that Joshua and Nick had become informants.

You won't find many naïve "hippies" in our community - young or old. And they are trying their best not to succumb and betray those that they have been taught to love, those who time and again have shared their last five dollars, or gave them a room for a summer at no cost. But it's a David vs. Goliath struggle, this system of set-ups and betrayal - or prison. Court documents show that John Grange both advised Nick that he was in danger, and advised people of the danger of befriending Nick.

John Grange executed his friends, or so the guilty verdict rendered. He enlisted the help of two local men to help him dispose of the bodies. A gloomy mug shot of a tall and thick young man, with his given and nickname "Chewey" spelled "Chooey" ran often in our local newspapers, and I hoped others remembered that "Chewey" is short for Chewbacca, the name of the large, but sweet sidekick of Star War's hero Hans Solo. Wondering if others would make that

connection, and see that we were looking at a mug shot of an intense young man who had garnered the large, gentle nickname when he was a boy.

It is only after John Grange's conviction that we read that the prosecutor admitted to the jury the witnesses against Grange weren't "the best", had "minimized their own involvement," and the only testimony that remained consistent, was what Wetle described as "the big picture." But what exactly is the "big picture"? Dane Williams and Jeffery Cunningham - local men who claim they were witnesses nearby when John Grange shot Joshua and Nick - had helped burn the bodies. They are expected to do a year in prison for that. That is how they were able to get murder charges against them dropped. They testified against John. Grange told the court he was a working man who enjoyed smoking marijuana, and that he was stranded at the barter faire after loaning his '87 Bronco to Dane Williams. The prosecutor also admits that the testimony of Williams and Cunningham was "necessary to convict Grange" because there wasn't any physical evidence that Grange executed his friends-turned-informers.

Joshua, Nick and John were barely out of their teenage years. Remember how smart everyone was just out of our teens? Most of us had, at best, a high school education and a minimum wage job, and according to statistics, about a third of us were buying and using illegal drugs.

Our drug laws, and the tactics used to enforce them, are what more and more people will say are insane, but John Grange could not plead insanity. If he had been set up, and committed these murders, he can't claim self-defense. Drug law violations often 'carry more time' than most violent crime convictions, even the most violent of crimes like rape and murder. And some of us once thought the drug war was supposed to be protecting our children.

Selective prosecutions of the drug war and the use of informants have spawned a snitch culture that has devastated Black and Hispanic communities for decades. The drug war violence in these communities is proof enough that the war leaves immeasurable collateral damage, while illegal drugs continue to proliferate measurably. Those are clear signs that the drug war is doing more harm than illegal drugs do. We ought to be changing course, not escalating present tactics. That is still not the trend however, and we all should be concerned.

Our economically depressed community has lost too many citizens to prisons, lots of good people who did nothing more than grow and sell marijuana. These nonviolent people paradoxically do more time than violent criminals. The "snitches" have coffee in the cafes and drink beer in the bars. People know who they are. It's the way it is around here.

Or the way it was. Perhaps soon, before there are more scattered human remains, our own community will begin to access and address the collateral damage of the war on drugs and ask this important question- is the drug war really protecting our youth? If current police and prosecutorial tactics that reward betrayal and fill our prisons and graveyards hasn't made a dent in drug availability after more than 30 intense years of waging it, then when will it? Never. It's time to stop the war on drugs.

