Legally High at a Colorado Campus

By ABIGAIL SULLIVAN MOORE and JULIE TURKEWITZ  OCT. 29, 2014

In an apartment complex just outside the western edge of the University of Colorado’s flagship campus, a 22-year-old psychology major named Zach has just leaned over an expensive oil rig — a twisting glass tube that he will use to smoke shatter, a hash oil concentrate. Once he lights up, his high will be rapid and intense.

Zach spends hundreds of dollars on smoking devices. But he has a side income. This evening’s session was preceded by visits to three medical marijuana dispensaries, where, using his state-issued card, he bought pot products to sell to friends at a markup. “Runners” — campus argot, as in running around buying for others — are an open secret on campus.

Zach takes a seat on his overstuffed sectional and tells how it happened: His first day living on campus, a sophomore had taken him to a dispensary for a pizza with marijuana baked in. He asked how he could get his own card, and friends coached him on telling a doctor about anxiety, nausea or back pain. “I just said I had a bike accident when I was younger, and that caused lower back pain, which caused nausea and that caused anxiety,” he recalls. “I was afraid it wouldn’t happen, so I just got all three knocked out.” He presented a bill mailed to his dorm as proof he was a state resident, which he wasn’t, and received a card allowing him to access medical marijuana immediately, two ounces at a time.

Some of Zach’s clients are under 21 and cannot buy recreational cannabis legally. But others are older students who simply don’t want to pay the hefty tax — three times that levied on medical marijuana. So despite the abundance
of recreational cannabis products since the first retail shops opened in January, there is still a vibrant black market for medical marijuana, which has been legal in Colorado since 2001 with a doctor’s recommendation.

“There’s definitely still the demand,” says Zach, who is on track to graduate in December. He makes anywhere from a few dollars to a thousand a month, depending on how much he hustles, but he says that overall sales have declined a bit, what with retail shops, student growers and all the medical cards.

It’s difficult to say if students are smoking more. There is no long-term data by age, but statewide about 16,000 18- to 24-year-olds are on the medical marijuana registry. That’s 14 percent of all cardholders. City of Boulder tax revenue for medical marijuana for the first six months of 2014 was up 30 percent, at $500,000 — about equal to revenue on recreational marijuana.

Nationally, marijuana use among young adults has clearly been trending upward. The percentage of college students who reported smoking within the previous year plummeted from a high of 51 percent in 1981 to a low of 26.5 percent in 1991, and has been zigzagging back up, to some 36 percent in 2013, according to the Monitoring the Future Study at the University of Michigan. Data released in September show that one of 20 college students (one of 11 men) gets high daily or near daily, the highest rate since 1981. To put that in perspective, from 1990 to 1994, fewer than one in 50 students used pot that frequently.

Experts say that the increase is surely a reflection of relaxed laws governing marijuana in some states, a movement gaining momentum. Floridians will face a ballot initiative on Tuesday on whether to legalize medical marijuana, which is allowed in almost half the states. Alaska, Oregon and District of Columbia voters will decide whether to follow Colorado and Washington State, where recreational marijuana has been legal since 2012.

The amendments ban smoking in public — on streets and in parks, shops and restaurants. The same holds for campuses, including university housing.

Dr. Donald A. Misch, associate vice chancellor for health and wellness at the University of Colorado, says that his main concern about the way
legalization will affect students is that the industry — and associated advertising and commercialization — promotes the notion that cannabis is harmless. Monitoring the Future asks high school seniors if they see “great harm” in smoking regularly: 60 percent do not. In 2005, 42 percent did not.

Dr. Misch is working with other campus officials to increase awareness about the effects of the substance, including its impact on learning. “It is not going to turn you into an ax murderer,” he says, “but what I tell people is: ‘The good news is that marijuana is in many ways better than alcohol. The bad news is it’s not as benign as many people want you to believe.’ ”

Tucked away in a windowless basement room in the university’s Wardenburg Health Center, three clean-cut undergraduates are examining how marijuana is affecting them. “Breathe,” a sign suggests in the softly lit room. Backpacks slung to the floor, the students form a restless crescent — pencils tapping, legs jiggling — around a new-age rug of concentric circles.

“Did anybody get in more trouble over the weekend?” asks Stephen Bentley, a substance abuse counselor. They hadn’t. The session, designed to help them see the discrepancy between getting high and reaching their goals, is one of three they have been mandated to attend. All are under 21 and were caught smoking.

Marijuana citations by the campus police are, in fact, down — 154 as of Oct. 3, compared with almost 256 in the same period last year. Christina Gonzales, dean of students, says the university is moving from a punitive stance to a more educational approach, easing up on enforcement. But last year, 718 students who had been sent to the health center by the courts or university after a substance-related offense (mostly alcohol) were found to be engaged in pot use that put them at risk.

Michael, a sophomore from Colorado, was caught over the summer in a Boulder park for possession. “A bike cop came up and saw me exhale.” He paid fines and fees of about $150, performed 24 hours of community service and had to complete Mr. Bentley’s three-part class. If he stays out of trouble for several months, the court will wipe his record clean. During the summer, he was smoking about five times a week but has slowed down with the start of
classes.

Mr. Bentley asks the group about problems with memory, which seems to resonate with Michael. “If I get high a number of times per week,” he says, “I notice that my memory slumps a little.”

Mr. Bentley empathizes. “You can’t remember your car keys, phone?”

“No, it’s not like that. If a friend tells me an answer to a problem when I’m working on homework and I’m not quite there yet, I can’t remember it.”

“So, you can’t hold it in your mind,” Mr. Bentley affirms. No judgment, no confrontation, no labels. This is the mantra.

Mr. Bentley and counselors at other universities say they are seeing a small but growing number of students who have been smoking since age 14 and are serious users. He mentions dabs, an exponentially powerful form of marijuana. Last year, he got an email from a member of the housing staff. Students were wielding a butane torch in the dorm. “The kids were saying, ‘We’re making crème brûlée on the hot plate.’ ”

Not exactly. The torches heat a nail. A dab of pot concentrate is placed on the head. Vapors are inhaled.

“That’s the way things work in this culture,” says Mr. Bentley, who has more than 20 years in the addiction field, 10 at Boulder. “People on the front lines are playing catch-up a lot of times.” Word spread quickly through the staff of the potential fire hazard.

Universities are searching for ways to respond to marijuana, the most abused substance on campuses after alcohol. But interventions are often adaptations of programs for heavy drinkers that don’t capture the marijuana experience, says Jason R. Kilmer, an assistant professor of psychiatry at the University of Washington. In a typical program for experienced smokers, students answer questions adapted from a widely used index of alcohol-related problems: Has the student ever passed out after using? Got into a fight? But they aren’t asked about eating too much, coughing and problems with sleep, motivation, memory and attention — top unwanted effects of marijuana named in a recent survey of students by Dr. Kilmer and colleagues. Helping students recognize problems can prompt them to reduce consumption.
Some colleges, including the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, Boston College and the University of Southern Indiana, have been adding programs tailored to marijuana users. C.U.-Boulder offers a tier of psychoeducational options — two levels of individual sessions for mild and more serious users, and a group program for moderate and heavier users. For students unable to curb their use, a more extensive program is being planned to help them add structure to their lives and find relaxation alternatives — yoga, maybe.

“It’s a retention strategy as well,” Mr. Bentley says. Users, even infrequent, are more likely to drop out, according to a 2013 report from the University of Maryland.

Alan J. Budney, a researcher and professor at the Geisel School of Medicine at Dartmouth, ticks off academic fallout: “Not getting to class, changing majors, the B average becomes a C average — they are small things that aren’t disastrous but they can change the course of where you are heading.”

Research on universities’ efforts is scant. Several studies have shown encouraging, if short-term results. Three months after a brief intervention, students from two campuses in the Northwest reported smoking less and experiencing fewer pot-related consequences; ditto for Wilmington students one month after their program.

At the heart of the sessions is motivational interviewing, which gets students to voice their own ambivalence about their use and eventually consider changing it.

Students first discuss what’s good about getting high, how it lubricates social interactions and dissipates boredom and stress. Michael, a driven computer engineering major, tells Mr. Bentley’s group that pot helps him feel his emotions. “Marijuana changed my point of view on life, not to take things so hard and go easier on myself.” And, of course, there are the perception-altering qualities. Ben, a junior, smiles and says: “When you’re high, watching a movie or going to a concert is freaking awesome.”

They also discuss what’s “not so good” (words like “bad” are taboo).
Spending too much: “I don’t want to even think about that,” says Kevin, the third member of the group, who smoked multiple times a day as a freshman but has cut back to three or four times a week. Lack of motivation scores, too. And anxiety. “If you have anxiety in your life regularly, it amplifies it,” Ben offers.

As students reveal their dislikes, counselors listen intently for signs of self-medication for anxiety, depression, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or post-traumatic stress disorder. But mostly, they listen for any hook that might motivate a student to cut back.

Relationship troubles caused by a partner’s disapproval of their marijuana use is a “biggie,” says Rebecca Caldwell, director of the substance abuse program in Wilmington. So are slipping grades, a factor motivating the three in Mr. Bentley’s session. For an athlete, it might be diminished lung capacity.

Because marijuana’s effects are subtle, some students don’t connect the dots with, say, feeling tired after a night’s sleep. Some don’t want to see the connection. Pot becomes part of who they are. Oregon State University shut down its group program two years ago and now offers only individual sessions because participants were enabling one another, says Robert C. Reff, director of the substance abuse program.

“I ask: ‘Who are your friends? How many smoke marijuana?’ And they say, ‘All of them.’”

Ask students what has changed at the University of Colorado since legalization and most will say: not much.

Boulder has a long history with cannabis. Hippies flocked to this oasis of independent thought, drawn by a bustling music scene and student protests. As the city morphed into a counterculture outpost and activist hotbed — passing strict environmental laws, relaxing drug enforcement and opening one of the state’s first abortion clinics — getting high was not just a way to tune out but also a political statement.

“The only rules here are no rules,” Rob Pudim, a resident, told a Newsweek reporter in a 1980 piece entitled “Where the Hip Meet to Trip.” “The only people in town who aren’t comfortable,” he said, “are straight people
who need boundaries.”

The campus still draws from afar. Nearly 40 percent of its 26,000 undergraduates are from out of state — a high percentage for a public university. They are attracted by mountain adventure and a stunning setting. The Flatirons, the steep slabs of rock that dominate the landscape, feel close enough to touch. Many students are here because of the robust science programs; C.U. is a member of the Association of American Universities, an exclusive group of research institutions. And because of its party-school reputation.

On a recent Friday, a clutch of students and friends gather around a table garnished for an evening of casual indulgence: beers, playing cards, tubes of medical marijuana and a bong. All are 21, or almost there, and from other states.

Several voice sentiments that are shared in other corners of campus. They didn’t come here simply because it’s located in a permissive pot town, but cannabis culture certainly played a role. “I could have went to a bunch of sweet public schools,” says Erik Mingo, “and I chose this one because I knew it was pretty accepted here. I knew people had an open mind.”

Mr. Mingo dropped out after the spring semester to work at a start-up. He has largely quit smoking, and isn’t indulging on this night. “I just didn’t really need it anymore,” he explains. “It helped me relax and think about myself and the world, and I just wasn’t getting the same return.” His priority now is excelling at a demanding job, he says. “I was moving on just naturally in my life.”

The campus is not under a cannabis cloud. Sometimes one sees a lit joint in the open or a “vape” pen in class, drawing ire from professors. But students and others talk about a shift in how they view cannabis consumption. Once an act of rebellion, it no longer seems to hold symbolic power. “Now it’s just part of everyday life,” says Joseph Kaley, 27, who graduated in 2009 and manages a Mexican restaurant on the Hill, an off-campus gathering spot. Mr. Kaley attended three of the campus’s famous April 20 smoke-outs, lighting up each time to protest marijuana’s criminal status at the time.
In 2012, the university successfully shut down “4/20,” saying it had grown so large it was disrupting academic life. Many were angered, particularly by the methods used to ward smokers away: Workers spread smelly fish fertilizer on the quad and anyone without a student identification card was turned away.

New students, when asked, see the smoke-out as a piece of quirky campus history. “It’s just kind of fading from people’s memories,” says Wyatt Ryder, 20, the chief of staff of the student government, which last April held a symposium offering “an all-inclusive inside dive into the realm of cannabis culture.”

“The goal was to have a very nuanced discussion about marijuana,” said Caitlin Pratt, 23, Mr. Ryder’s colleague in student government. Panelists discussed making money in the industry, the effects of cannabis on the mind and efforts to legalize the substance in other states. One of the most popular panels was led by Nolan Kane, a C.U. professor attempting to map the cannabis genome to better understand marijuana’s medical, fuel and biotechnology potential.

A few months later, Mr. Ryder attended a national conference for student government representatives. He was accosted with questions — and jokes — about pot culture at his university. Mr. Ryder, who doesn’t even smoke, was shocked to be appointed the conference’s unofficial marijuana expert.

“I just think it’s fascinating,” he said, “because to us in Colorado, it’s not such a big deal. But to other people, it’s a major issue.”

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