

Medical Cannabis Press Conference Speech  
2/1/2017  
State Capitol  
Madison, WI

I'd like to start by expressing my sincere appreciation for everyone who came here today. My name is Steve Acheson. I'm an Iraq War Veteran, I served on Active Duty in the Army as a Forward Observer from 2004 to the end of 2008, and deployed to Sadr City, Iraq in 2005. I'm here today to show my support for both the state-wide advisory referendum on legalizing medicinal marijuana and the Compassionate Cannabis Care Act, and to serve as a united voice and for what I know to be thousands of other veterans across Wisconsin who are ALREADY using medicinal cannabis to treat their service-connected injuries.

I'd like to take a minute to tell you my story. When I was deployed, I was involved in over 400 missions as lead driver of a combat escort team for our Brigade Commander, and drove nearly 18,000 miles through some of the most heavily bombed routes in and around the greater Baghdad area. I was witness to many horrific scenes and aftermaths of suicide bombings, IED attacks, explosions, and even human stampedes. Combine those experiences with the constant state of alertness required to be lead driver of my team's convoy, I developed and was diagnosed with moderate PTSD after returning home. To this day, I still experience daily bouts of debilitating anxiety, hypervigilance, frequent nightmares, depression, lack of sleep, disassociation, and even suicidal ideations as a result of my deployment experience.

In addition to battling PTSD - an invisible wound of war - I am also still struggling with a multitude of physical disabilities connected to my service. While on a mission, we blew out a tire on our Humvee. As I was attempting to remove the spare tire from its mount on the hatchback of our truck, it broke loose and came crashing down on top of me, essentially crushing my L5-S1 vertebra. Although I was able to complete the remainder of my deployment, I did so in excruciating pain. After returning home, I underwent the first of what would be three back surgeries spanning the better part of decade. My most recent surgery was this past June, when 90% of the remaining disc material herniated, causing a condition called Cauda Equina - essentially a stroke of the nerves that emanate from that vertebra. Now, I no longer have feeling in my right leg and groin, and have experienced a loss of certain reproductive functions, sensations related to bowel and bladder movements, and other negative and lasting side effects.

(Take out pills from bag)

Since my initial surgery in 2007, I have ingested literally thousands of pills prescribed to me by Army, VA, and private doctors. Painkillers, Muscle Relaxers, Anti-Anxiety/Depression medication, sleeping pills, stomach medication, anti-inflammatories, and more. After each subsequent surgery, I could feel my body's reaction to the medication - and the unquenchable thirst for more pills. However, the pain, the anxiety, sleeplessness, and depression still remained, despite being heavily medicated.

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After getting out of the Army with an Honorable Discharge at the end of 2008, I immediately attempted to use my GI Bill to go to College. At this point in time, I was taking up to 7 different medications daily. I would equate my existence to something resembling a zombie. Pills to TRY go to sleep, pills to TRY to numb the pain, pills to TRY and relax, pills to TRY to eat, pills to TRY shit because the other pills make you constipated...It was nearly impossible to eat anything because my stomach was constantly in knots trying to process all the medications. Couple that with the symptoms of PTSD in a new environment with new people and students – none of whom had any idea of the experiences I had gone through while deployed as a 19-year old – it was nearly impossible to function as a non-traditional student with the rigors of a pre-engineering program. I was considering dropping out of college after just the first couple weeks, because the thought of trying to continue in that state of existence just seemed to be too much to overcome.

Right about the time I was ready to give up hope, a classmate of mine invited me to join her after class to partake in smoking some cannabis. Initially, the “good Solider” in me was hesitant to participate, but I figured what else do I have to lose - I’m already nearing the end of my rope.

Realizing the potential to get my life back on track, I continued self-medicating with cannabis. Slowly, I was able to replace EVERY SINGLE MEDICATION I had been taking with ONE natural, safe, and most importantly, EFFECTIVE alternative. School became much less of a chore, and the hallways didn’t seem to close in on me as tightly as they once did. In the classroom, I was able to focus on the lecture instead of worrying about whether or not the kids sitting behind me were about to launch some surprise attack. At home, I was able to get back to eating regularly, my mood had drastically improved, and my sleep habits returned to somewhat of a normalcy.

I went on to found the first ever student veterans organization on campus, and it quickly grew to the largest student organization in its first semester of existence. My confidence continued to build, and I began working as a math tutor, student ambassador, and representative in our student government. In 2011, I was named Co-Student of the Year at UW-Fox Valley, and earned my Associates Degree while making the Dean’s list in every semester. I went on the transfer to UW Platteville, and in 2013 graduated with honors with a Bachelor’s Degree in Civil/Structural Engineering. NONE of this would have been possible had it not been for Medicinal Cannabis.

After graduation, my partner Steph and I started Peacefully Organic Produce, Wisconsin’s first Veteran-led Community Supported Agriculture farm right outside Madison in Waunakee. Through our farm, we were able to establish a USDA funded training program specifically for Veterans returning back to civilian life, many of whom were dealing with PTSD, TBI, Military Sexual Trauma and other visible and invisible wounds from war. Like me, many of them also happened to find medicinal cannabis to be the most effective medication available to treat their symptoms.

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Medicinal Cannabis allowed me to reach my full potential, cope with PTSD and the ongoing pain associated with three back surgeries. Had I continued using the concoction of painkillers, muscle relaxers, and other harmful prescriptions, I'm sure I would have become one of the 20 veterans a day who loses hope and takes their own life.

This is not to say that I'm not still struggling. This past year in particular has been extremely difficult. The negative side effects from my last surgery have caused me to make the decision to discontinue our farming operations for the foreseeable future, as I can no longer physically perform the daily chores required to have a successful farm. However, in this past year, I along with 4 other Veterans, have co-founded High Ground Veterans Advocacy, a non-profit that is based in DC dedicated to addressing the specific needs of the Post 9/11 generation of Veterans. I've also found a home with the Wisconsin State Farmer's Union, advocating on behalf of rural communities and family farmers alike.

This past weekend, the Wisconsin State Farmer's Union held their annual state convention in Wisconsin Dells. I am very excited to announce that the delegation representing chapters from around the state have voted to adopt a new policy supporting BOTH the legalization and production of Industrial Hemp, as well as the legalization of Medicinal Marijuana. Helping to curb rural opiate addiction was one of the main reasons why the Wisconsin Farmer's Union voted to support the legalization of Medicinal Marijuana - a non-addictive and relatively safe alternative when compared to opiates. In fact, states in which medical marijuana is legal have, on the whole, experienced a reduction in overall opiate use and deaths from opiate overdose. However, Medical Marijuana, in my opinion, shouldn't be viewed as the silver bullet in solving the opiate crisis, rather, simply another tool in the toolbox for legislators to help struggling citizens.

There are people in this state who are struggling, many of them are Veterans. Those who have put their lives on the line for this State and Country deserve the right to have access to Safe, Non-Addictive, and most importantly, EFFECTIVE medication. We are not criminals; we do not want to live in the shadows of society any longer! Thank you for your time.