

The Original Parent Movement

By Sue Rusche, former President, and CEO of National Families in Action

Sue Rusche is one of the founders of the original Parent Movement and former President and CEO of National Families in Action. We are honored that she agreed to write this article for the first addition of our newsletter. She is currently writing *Biological Capture: How Companies that Make Addictive Drugs Get Us to Keep Buying Them*, which contains an expanded version of this chapter. She hopes to complete it by summer's end.



In 1961, less than two percent of Americans had ever used any illicit drug. By 1979, 66% of young adults (ages 18-25) and 27% of adolescents (ages 12-17) used marijuana at least once in their lifetimes; 44% and 21%, respectively, used it in the past year; 36% and 14%, used it in the past month; and 1 in 11 high school seniors used pot daily.

What drove that explosion over 18 years? Throughout the 1970s, 11 states decriminalized marijuana, reducing penalties for simple possession to that of a traffic ticket. Children wrongly perceived that the decriminalization of marijuana meant that it was not harmful.

With the decriminalization movement came “head shops” that sold drug paraphernalia in communities across the country. One expert called head shops “little learning centers for young drug abusers.” They sold such items as:

- Coca-Cola stash cans to hide drugs from parents and police,
- Cocaine concert kits with tools to prepare and snort a line, and
- “Frisbees” embedded with a pipe to inhale marijuana yourself, then toss a toke to a friend.

The DeKalb County, Georgia, neighborhood where I have resided for years, surrounds Emory University. Children as young as 12 and 13 had begun using marijuana. Stores suddenly started selling drug paraphernalia, and a head shop opened half a mile from our high school. A steering committee of concerned parents met in November 1977 and formed DeKalb Families in Action, which later became National Families in Action (NFIA). We had three goals:

- Prevent children from using any illicit drug,
- Stop decriminalization, and
- Ban head shops.

We formed several committees to help us reach each goal: research, paraphernalia, trademark, newsletter, and education committees.

Research Committee—Parents collected scientific and medical information about the harmful effects of marijuana and prepared fact sheets to distribute at PTA meetings.

Paraphernalia Committee—Parents listed all head shops in our county by zip code, buying samples and assembling “bong shows” for NFIA speakers. They subscribed to *High Times Magazine*, studying ads and content to learn how paraphernalia was marketed to children.

Trademark Committee—Parents sent letters with pictures to manufacturers showing how others were violating their trademarks by turning their containers into stash cans. Our letter to Coca-Cola’s president resulted in the company suing just one stash can maker. Coca-Cola stash cans disappeared from the market nationwide.

Newsletter Committee—Parents wrote articles for our newsletter, *Drug Abuse Update*, which we published quarterly.

Education Committee—Parents became speakers to educate other parents at PTA meetings. After demonstrating the “bong show,” they explained how marijuana could hurt kids. A key strategy was to collect contact information from parents who wanted to receive our newsletter.

We outfitted two members of the Georgia Legislature who served on the Steering Committee with “bong shows” so they could educate fellow law makers. They sponsored the nation’s first bills that banned drug paraphernalia. That made national news, and suddenly parents across the nation began calling us, asking for help. We wrote *How to Form a Families in Action Group in Your Community* to help parents organize. State after state passed similar laws, and head shops disappeared as swiftly as Coca-Cola stash cans.

Another of our Steering Committee members, Keith Schuchard, joined Professor Buddy Gleaton to form the Parents Resource Institute for Drug Education (PRIDE) at Georgia State University. Keith and her husband held a birthday party for their oldest daughter turning 13 and discovered the children were using drugs. They formed the nation’s first parent peer group centered around their child and their child’s best friends. Keith wrote *Parents, Peers, and Pot* for the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA). NIDA received more than one million requests for her book. PRIDE formed the National Federation of Parents for Drug-Free Youth (NFP) in Washington, D.C., to represent the 3,000 parent groups NFIA and PRIDE helped form. NFP drew First Lady Nancy Reagan into the effort. It helps to have a First Lady champion your cause!

Results? When the parent movement ended in 1992, adolescents' lifetime and past-year marijuana use fell from 27% to 9% and 21% to 7%, respectively. Their past-month use fell from 14% to 3%. High school seniors' daily use fell from 1 in 11 seniors to 1 in 50. Similar reductions were achieved among young adults. No one has achieved such results since then, and, sadly, use has risen again. NFIA's Drug Information Collection is now at the University of California, San Francisco, where the story of the original parent movement will be preserved forever.

I am so happy to see SAM's Parent Action Network and Parent Movement 2.0 emerge. Their challenge is much more difficult, given all the threats today's parents must steer their children away from. But I have no doubt that a second parent movement will triumph, and today's children will be able to thrive because of it.