

Why Your Voice Matters: A Message from Dr. Kevin A. Sabet

April marks the fourth anniversary of the Parent Action Network (PAN), a SAM initiative we created to shine a light on the enormous harms of marijuana on individuals and their families. The initial vision for PAN was an army of parents dedicated to public health—and an army it has become.

The work of PAN honors the countless families who have lost loved ones to this addiction-for-profit industry. Again and again, when I travel to speak, a parent I have never met approaches me with yet another tragic account of a child or loved one who, once filled with promise, is now lost to marijuana.

PAN is admittedly not a fully new idea: It's rooted in the grassroots anti-drug movement that began back in the 1970s. After a group of parents found their teenagers using marijuana and PCP while celebrating a birthday party in their own backyard, the parents formed the Parent Resource Institute for Drug Education (PRIDE), using their real-life situations to create awareness and change. Around the same time, another parent—our good friend and renowned advocate Sue Rusche—began to notice the proliferation of shops in her neighborhood selling drug paraphernalia (yes, the marketing arm of drug culture was strong back then as well). She felt compelled to act, so she founded National Families in Action, determined to lobby Congress to ban these paraphernalia shops.

These are just two examples of parents and average citizens standing up and taking action to protect their families against the harms of drugs—and it was precisely this history and these grassroots groups that inspired us to create PAN.

There was also another element at play. Marijuana legalizers often highlight the stories of suffering people who turned to the drug. I knew we should follow their example: not only are the facts on our side, but the stories of personal devastation are as well.

I think about the story of Sally Schindel's son, Andy, almost every day. Andy was a beloved son, a veteran who served his country, a young man full of promise—and he ultimately took his own life while experiencing a marijuana-induced psychotic episode. PAN's work is, in a deep sense, about people like Andy. It's about finding true purpose in our work, honoring the memories of lives lost, and seeing the human toll. It's the most powerful "why" that pushes us to do what we do.

Andy left behind a note with four words that will forever be seared into my brain: “marijuana killed my soul.” Those four simple words had such an impact because we are in the business of lives and hearts. We have to remember the Andys of the world. PAN is one of the best ways we can do that.

Advocating for sensible policies now matters more than ever. We now have the wind at our backs. In Arizona, Oklahoma, Massachusetts, and elsewhere, states face legislative efforts and serious conversations about repealing adult-use legalization—a conversation we simply could not have had four years ago. Public opinion nationally has turned against commercialized marijuana. The New York Times has now stated that its initial position on legalization was wrong, calling the ubiquity of marijuana a “problem.” These efforts may not succeed initially, but we have our best chance yet of achieving meaningful reform.

In other words, it’s time to double down on our efforts.

I’m so proud of PAN and how far Crissy and Bronwen have brought this initiative. And I’m proud of the PAN parents who have courageously turned their pain into purpose. Nothing warms my heart more than seeing a group of our parents on the Hill or at our offices in DC. Nothing means more, which is why we are committed to raising their voices and harnessing their power to protect lives.