

Taking care of my dying dad

From 2007 through 2009, I was living between New York and Boston — finally “living the dream.” I’d left Maine to become a writer, and I was finally writing for magazines and working for organizations and startups. I even managed to be a contestant on the game show “Cash Cab.” For this kid from Maine, things were beyond exciting.

But then it became evident that it was time to go home. I was 26.



ALEX STEED

My father was entering what was definitively his last year. That dream was no more.

This scenario had hung over me for more than half my life. I was groomed for it.

My father was a generation older than my friends’ fathers, and he had been dealing with one terminal illness or another throughout my teenage years. He kept small bundles of cash hidden around the house and told me where I could find it “when I die.”

“When I die, here are the numbers to call.”

“When I die” was sometimes as popular an expression as “How was your day?”

As complicated as it was, I got a chance to know my father better — to hear about his life and his stories and his time in Korea. I got to know the man rather than the father.

So I returned to Maine and eventually came to live in what was once the laundry room. With some much appreciated help from my sister Margaret, who had her hands full with her own family in New Hampshire, I took care of my father until he died.

My dad and I didn’t get along when I was a kid. When I was 12, my parents separated, and because I preferred living in Maine, I went to live with my father. He suddenly had this new 12-year-old, and we had to figure out how to live together. It wasn’t always easy. Often it was like “The Odd Couple” meets “Mad Max.”

That dream I’d been living was over.

I wasn’t writing for these great magazines anymore or for great organizations. I wasn’t making any money, really, and I was going into debt. I was surrounded by death, and I felt incredibly lonely all of the time.

I don’t resent it because it was wonderful in the way those opportunities are. As complicated as it was, I got a chance to know my father better — to hear about his life and his stories and his time in Korea. I got to know the man rather than the father. It was difficult, but it was a privilege and a luxury at the same time.

In my father’s vulnerability, and consequently in my own, I didn’t only get to know my father better. Our relationship fundamentally changed. I was lucky to get better acquainted with his sense of humor in a way that hadn’t really been on the table when I was a kid.

He’d fart really loudly while we were at the pharmacy because it mortified me, and what did he care?

He was dying and didn’t have a care to give about what people thought. His fingernail fell off one day — the whole thing — and he put it in an envelope with my name on it. In it was a note that said, “A gift from your morbid father.” One time, as he was filling out paperwork in a crowded doctor’s office and I was checking him in at the window, he yelled across the room. “They’re urologists! See if they can help you with your erectile dysfunction!” Then, he laughed until he couldn’t breathe.

The teenage me might not believe that the adult me is writing this, but this was a gift — a complicated, daunting, sad, stressful, disorienting and occasionally hilarious gift.

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OP ART BY DANBY

What Maine can learn from Colorado about legal pot

BY CHRISTOPHER BURNS
BDN STAFF

The campaign to legalize recreational marijuana got a boost earlier this month after a judge overturned the secretary of state’s decision to throw out thousands of petition signatures, potentially paving the way to a vote this November.

As Mainers weigh the prospect of legalized marijuana in the Pine Tree State, many will look to Colorado for answers about how a legal marijuana landscape will look.

Colorado has served as a convenient talking point for proponents and opponents of legalizing marijuana, with one side declaring the state’s burgeoning marijuana industry a success and a boon for state coffers and the other calling it a failed experiment. The legalization of marijuana, however, has been a mixed bag, according to a new report from the Colorado Department of Public Safety.

But with only a couple of years of data, this report marks only the beginning of the effort to understand the effects of legalization in the Rocky Mountain State. And its findings aren’t likely to fit conveniently into the political narrative on either side.

“It is too early to draw any conclusions about the potential effects of marijuana legalization or commercialization on public safety, public health or youth outcomes, and this may always be difficult due to the lack of historical data,” Department of Public Safety analyst Jack Reed wrote in the report.

Colorado teens aren’t using marijuana more than they were before legal sales began.

One contentious point in the recreational marijuana debate is whether it the increased availability of the drug will lead to more teens smoking weed. Marijuana use among 12- to 17-year-olds in Colorado is the highest in the nation, but that’s nothing new. So far, legal mari-

juana hasn’t had a noticeable impact on teen use, according to National Survey on Drug Use and Health data.

In Colorado, about 12.6 percent of 12- to 17-year-olds reportedly used marijuana in the last 30 days for the combined years 2013 and 2014, a slight uptick from 11.2 percent in 2012-2013, according to the U.S. Office of Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services. Nationally, about 7.2 percent of 12- to 17-year-olds had reported using marijuana in the past month in 2013-2014, virtually unchanged from 2012-2013.

Opponents of legalization point to these data as evidence that teens have become casualties of the push for recreational marijuana, while proponents argue it’s evidence that legalization won’t lead to skyrocketing use among teens.

But the data aren’t sufficient to draw conclusions one way or another because the increase in Colorado teen use isn’t statistically significant, federal statisticians wrote in a 2015 report. “There doesn’t appear to be a significant increase in teen marijuana use yet that we know of, and that’s a good thing,” said Mike Van Dyke, chief of environmental epidemiology at the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment.

Nonetheless, Van Dyke and other state public health officials are closely monitoring teen marijuana use as the market matures. As the availability of marijuana grows, Van Dyke noted that public acceptance of the drug could inspire greater teen use.

Van Dyke said the state has taken steps that could reduce this risk, including banning public use of marijuana, and the state Legislature is considering modifying regulations for edibles to prohibit vendors from selling them in shapes — such as animals, fruits or humans — that appeal to children.

In the first year after legalization, Colorado saw hospitalizations for marijuana use spike — particularly among out-of-staters.

A tourism industry has grown around legal

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We don’t have to spend more money

Maine can improve Legislature in other ways

There has been a lot of talk about money in politics lately. From Hillary’s \$368,000-per-person Hollywood dinners and Emily Cain’s jaunt to the Democratic megadonor gala to Harriet Tubman knocking off Andrew Jackson and underdog Republican Ande Smith beating incumbent Chellie Pingree in individual donations, discussions about dollars are everywhere.

Meanwhile, back here in Maine, we’ve seen battles around which tax dollars should go into the Clean Elections pile and a bipartisan push to pay legislators more. Eight months ago, we were told state-level elected office was unreachable for many because raising money is corrupting and arduous. Voters, rightly or wrongly, agreed to spend more tax money on elections to solve that problem. Now we hear arguments that holding elective office is untenable because it does not pay enough, leading to pay raise proposals.

To be fair, the present structure supports their argument. Legislators spend a few days per week in Augusta. If you get elected and find yourself on a busy committee like Appropriations, you can expect to spend a lot more time there. For the first year, this occurs over six months. In the second year, around four months.

As the sessions come to a close, legislators are often on site every day rushing to finish their work. The collegial atmosphere can turn collegiate, with our elected officials finishing their work at 2 a.m. on the day it is due, or “statutory adjournment.”

What do they get for all of this? Around \$25,000 for two years of service. It is not exorbitant, but if you assume 10 months of work for the two sessions, the annualized salary is \$30,000. Adding in their taxpayer-paid health and dental insurance provides about an additional \$8,000 value. If they spend 150 days in session and committee meetings, add another \$10,000 in per diem reimbursements to help cover their costs: \$70 per day.

Of course, there also are special retirement benefits for legislators. If you spent your career in the private sector, the pension is not substantial. However, if you were employed by the state or as a teacher for most of your career, legislative service can have a significant impact on your retirement income.

The simple fact is people confuse congressional benefits with state legislative ones. Unlike Bernie Sanders, Angus King or Ted Cruz, Justin Alford and Mike Thibodeau aren’t earning \$174,000 annually from Senate service. That confusion makes it difficult to listen to cries for pay raises with a straight face.

But even with a passable argument on why more money is justified, the solution to every problem needn’t be tax dollars. Simply increasing pay does not change the massive time-drain that is legislative service. How many adults in the middle of their lives — with jobs and families — can dedicate three days per week to Augusta for six months on end? Some can, but they are often professionals who set their own schedules such as lawyers and brokers or business owners.

Instead of increasing the pay for legislative service, why not rework the workload and stretch existing dollars further? Some states, such as Virginia, Florida and Kentucky, limit their legislatures to 30 or 60 calendar days. Others do not set firm deadlines but let committees work on matters with the bodies convening occasionally to enact legislation. There are countless ways to reform the process, though it probably is the least captivating topic imaginable.

When voters decided to expand clean elections, a major argument was helping more people run for the legislature. Whether you receive \$10,000 or \$60,000 in taxpayer campaign funding, it doesn’t make the time commitment more viable for people with normal jobs. Before rushing to add more money to the pile for those who do get elected, let’s find out if we can do things better. More money isn’t always a solution; sometimes it is just more spending.

Michael Cianchette is former chief counsel to Gov. Paul LePage.



MICHAEL CIANCHETTE