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FULL CIRCLE

Despite the unfortunate circumstances that led to his prison sentence, **WELDON ANGELOS** now works to help others escape cannabis-related prison convictions.



BY R. SCOTT RAPPOLO

PHOTOS: COURTESY WELDON ANGELOS

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or Weldon Angelos, the events of the late 1990s and early 2000s still seem unreal.

A kid from Salt Lake City—not exactly the orbital center of the hip-hop world—had somehow worked his way into the ranks of California’s musical heavyweights. Before he knew how it had happened, he was working with Eminem, recording with his idols at Death Row Records and hanging out at Snoop Dogg’s mansion, staying up all night smoking weed, making music and losing to Snoop’s son at *NBA Live* on the PlayStation.

“It’s just weird how everything happened, because I didn’t have any connections in the industry,” Angelos recalls. “It was just happenstance that a young kid from Salt Lake City ended up bumping into people and they took a liking to me, and we became friends.

“I was really hungry, and I wanted to get in the music industry at all costs. I would stay up all night writing beats, writing songs,” he adds. “None of it seemed real until everything came crashing down and I was about to lose it.”

Instead of becoming known for his music, Angelos would become famous for a different reason. He was a victim of one of the gravest injustices ever fostered in the War on Drugs: a 55-year prison sentence for selling \$300 worth of cannabis.

It’s a journey that would take him from the metal-and-steel hell of federal prison to the White House, tearing down some of the most draconian drug laws along the way. And with cannabis legalization sweeping the nation, he’s now fighting to free others also railroaded by the system for marijuana offenses that aren’t even crimes anymore.

was a risk worth taking.

“I didn’t sell coke or meth like some of my friends did, and I didn’t end up going to prison for murder,” Angelos says. “I felt like selling weed was harmless. It was the lesser of the evils of the time, and if I do get in trouble it’s going to be minor. I might do 30 days in jail or get probation, so to me it was worth the risk while I’m cultivating my relationships in the industry and seeing my dreams materialize.”

Angelos believes his visibility in the music industry caught the attention of authorities in Salt Lake City, where he was still living.

“They looked at me like I was bringing Ebola into Utah, bringing the rap, hip-hop culture here, and if they didn’t do something about it they will have invited moral corruption, so to speak,” he says. And being close to Snoop, perhaps the most notorious stoner of the day, whom authorities were salivating to put behind bars, also made him a target.

Cannabis and Music

Like many members of Generation X, Angelos came to cannabis courtesy of Dr. Dre’s 1992 album, *The Chronic*.

Growing up in a poor neighborhood of Salt Lake City, it was easy to score a dime bag. The herb opened up something in him, a new creativity, and soon he was making his own music.

Though still only a teenager, he began traveling to Los Angeles, hanging around recording studios and getting to know people. They liked his music, and, of course, everyone enjoyed weed. Soon he was producing albums and collaborating with famous rappers. He even went on tour with Snoop.

He also made a music video with Snoop, in which they puffed massive foot-long joints. Today, Angelos points to this as the beginning of his troubles.

He was selling weed on the side until the musical royalties would start rolling in. Angelos knew it was risky—cannabis was still very much illegal in Utah in the early 2000s—but compared with the fates befalling many others in the “gangsta rap” industry, he figured it

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—Weldon Angelos

A Confidential Informant

Around this time, a guy Angelos had known for years approached him. He’d just gotten out of prison and needed to sell some weed to make some money. Angelos helped him out.

“I did it three times and never did make anything off it. It wasn’t about the money. He just said he needed help,” Angelos says. >>



Weldon Angelos shaking hands with Utah Senator Mike Lee.



Angelos grew suspicious when the man began asking for meth and guns. He was right to be. His old friend was a confidential informant working for the feds in exchange for leniency in his own case. In November 2002, authorities raided Angelos's apartment. When they found an illegal firearm in a safe, what could have been a simple drug-selling case got a whole lot more serious.

Federal laws at the time treated the presence of a gun as an aggravating factor in criminal cases, vastly increasing the severity of punishment. Though Angelos swears the gun didn't leave the safe, prosecutors put it in his pocket for all three weed deals and charged him with 20 separate counts.

He turned down a plea deal of 15 years in prison and was found guilty of 16 charges. Because of mandatory-minimum sentencing laws, he knew he could face 55 years. But Angelos didn't believe it. Surely the judge wouldn't actually hand down such a sentence. He didn't even have any prior convictions.

"I thought it was impossible in America, 55 years for weed," Angelos says. "I couldn't accept that America does this to people."

Judge Paul Cassell did in fact criticize such a sentence, calling it "cruel, unjust and even irrational." He called on President George W. Bush to issue a pardon. He wrote a long legal brief arguing against such a sentence. But in the end, he decided he had no choice but to impose it.

When he was standing in the courtroom, Angelo says, "It sunk in. It felt like I was punched in the gut. I really got numb."

He was just 24 years old.

A Complete Nightmare

When he first arrived at the Lompoc federal correctional facility in Santa Barbara County, Angelos says "it was like you see in the movies."

Angelos talks about cannabis legalization alongside Senator Cory Booker and others at an event in DC.



"I knew I had two choices. I could GET OUT OF PRISON AND BE BITTER AND BE ANGRY THAT I LOST EVERYTHING, which I did, or I could get out and do something to make sure nobody ever has to go through what my family went through. I chose that route."
—Weldon Angelos

"It was literally a crazy, gang-infested prison," he says. "I'm like, 'Man, I just sold some weed and I have to live in here?' It was a complete nightmare."

Other inmates didn't even believe he was in for marijuana. He could barely believe it himself. Surely, he'd be out in months on appeal.

No such relief was forthcoming. The Bush administration ignored his plea for clemency. Higher courts rejected his appeals. The months turned to years. The Obama administration did nothing.

Yet Angelos kept hope.

"I always thought somebody was eventually going to listen, but if I get out and I'm 50 or 60, what's the point? My life is over," he says. "Everything I worked for to build is over. I wanted to get out and see my sons while they were still young so I could help raise them and try to get my career back."

Angelos' harsh sentence had caused a massive public outcry, which did not diminish while he was locked away. His case caught the attention of politicians from both sides of the aisle, as well as influential billionaires like the Koch brothers and a wide range of celebrities. It became the most glaring national example of the need to reform federal sentencing laws.

Meanwhile, time passed slowly. In 2011, inmates were allowed MP3 players, so Angelos could at least enjoy his beloved music. He became sort of a prison celebrity, helping other inmates with their legal cases, many of whom were also imprisoned for marijuana. Outside the walls, Colorado and Washington legalized cannabis. California would do the same in 2016. But still, Angelos sat there, his 20s turning into his 30s, his music career over and his sons growing up without a father. >>

Angelos poses with comedian Jeff Ross.



Green, an endeavor to help those still serving time for cannabis, and he helps inmates obtain legal aid, raises money for their commissary accounts and writes clemency petitions. Angelos has helped at least a dozen prisoners secure early release.

“A lot of people don’t have celebrities and senators to help them, so I have to use my connections to help them,” he says.

His next step is working with his influential contacts to have marijuana completely removed from federal law, though it would still be illegal in some states that have such laws.

“When I left prison, I left with my DIGNITY, RESPECT AND WITHOUT A SCRATCH. That wasn’t an easy thing to do.”

—Weldon Angelos

Associating with celebrities isn’t out of the norm for Angelos.

And then, suddenly, it was over. In 2016, federal prosecutors filed for a reduction in sentence.

Angelos walked out a free man 30 days later.

“When I left prison, I left with my dignity, respect and without a scratch,” he says. “That wasn’t an easy thing to do.”

But he was determined not to forget about the ones he left behind.

Legal Reform

“I knew I had two choices,” Angelos says. “I could get out of prison and be bitter and be angry that I lost everything, which I did, or I could get out and do something to make sure

nobody ever has to go through what my family went through. I chose that route.”

He immediately began work on a documentary about his travails. He kept in contact with all the celebrities and politicians and journalists who had helped free him, and he started the Weldon Project to provide cannabis consumers and businesses with a way to assist people who have been negatively affected by marijuana prohibition.

Then a funny thing happened. President Donald Trump invited Angelos to a prison-reform summit at the White House. This led to the First Step Act, a bipartisan bill that established the first major criminal-justice reform

at the federal level in decades. Judges could now hand down sentences shorter than the mandatory minimums. Prosecutors could also no longer “stack” firearms charges on top of others to create extremely long sentences.

Through it all, Angelos was the poster boy for change, the story his allies in Congress and the media told over and over again.

“Prosecutors no longer have that lethal weapon to hold over someone’s head to force them to plead to something they didn’t do or force them into cooperation, and that’s one of the biggest achievements of my lifetime,” Angelos says.

He also launched Mission

Amazingly, Angelos isn’t bitter about losing 13 years of his life, even though his sons were so young when he went in and he missed much of their childhoods.

“I’m definitely mad I lost my youth, my best years, my prime,” Angelos, who is now 41, says. “I’d probably be rich by now. I’d just signed a major record deal.”

“I was on my way up with the music I was producing, so they pretty much ruined my life,” he continues. “But rather than being bitter, I want to make sure other peoples’ lives aren’t ruined or that I can help them get out.”

To learn more about the Weldon Project, go to theweldonproject.org. **HT**