Amendment 64 Oral History Project Interview

Monday, December 7, 2015

Mason Tvert – Part 4 of 4

Janet Bishop, Interviewer

JANET BISHOP: This is Janet Bishop. And we're doing a bit of an addendum to our wonderful oral history with Mason Tvert. I just have a few more questions to ask of Mason, and have the opportunity to do so today.

The date is December 7, 2015. We're back at the Law Offices of Vicente Sederberg and sitting in the large conference room with Mason, who has graciously agreed to give us 15 more minutes of his time, roughly, to answer a few more questions. Mason, thank you so much for agreeing to answer a few more questions for us.

MASON TVERT: Sure. Thanks again.

JANET BISHOP: And again, I've listened to all six hours of the oral history, and it's fabulous. It's wonderful, very, very rich in stories and very, very helpful to us that you were our first oral history narrator, because you really set the stage for Amendment 64. But after I left the last session with you, I realized I really hadn't asked you about your experiences in working with the national media outlets, especially your work with the New York Times, who ran a whole series of articles on the Colorado experiment, shall we say, last summer, 2014, in their national edition. And then you do have a wonderful take on reporter Maureen Dowd's experiences in sampling marijuana when she was in Denver that got reported in the New York Times. So I wanted to get as much as you were willing to share of that on record for the record.

And since you are communications director of the MPP, Marijuana Policy Project, I thought it would be good if I got a chance to spend a few more minutes with you just talking about your work with national media outlets, especially your work with the New York Times, who ran a whole series of articles on the Colorado experiment, shall we say, last summer, 2014, in their national edition. And then you do have a wonderful take on reporter Maureen Dowd's experiences in sampling marijuana when she was in Denver that got reported in the New York Times. So I wanted to get as much as you were willing to share of that on record for the record.

So with that preamble, tell me your experiences in working with the national media and advising them on their reporting of Amendment 64, and also your take on how it's been portrayed in the international and national media.

MASON TVERT: Well, the amount of media attention that the issue has received has obviously skyrocketed. The difference between 2015 and even 2013 or even 2014 is major. I would say that the passage of Amendment 64, that really was a big boost in the amount of national and international media coverage we were seeing. But it was really then the first sale in January of 2014, that first marijuana sale that after that is really when things took off even more I would say, and have been holding steady since then. But yeah, it's a whole different ballgame.
There was a point, if you had asked me on Election Day in 2012 how many times I had appeared on cable news or on national media, I could probably remember most of them. I couldn't come close anymore. It's just entirely different, the number of connections, the number of reporters I've spoke with, producers and so on. It's just grown dramatically.

JANET BISHOP: Mhm. And do you think the amendment and the work towards the amendment and what's going on in Colorado has been portrayed accurately for the most part in the media?

MASON TVERT: Well, I'd say generally I think that you're grading on a curve, based on how marijuana has been treated by the media for decades. So if it was a matter of is it being done accurately in a vacuum, would it be considered Pulitzer Prize winning? Not necessarily.

But given the history surrounding marijuana and given the amount of, shall we say, controversy, or the number of opinions out there on the subject, I'd say it's a relatively fair job. But I'd say that a lot of the same types of criticisms that could be applied to the media for other things could be applied for marijuana as well. But yeah, generally speaking, I think the story's gotten out there.

And we're always going to have these situations where there's going to be facts and there's going to be interpretations or analysis. And it's just going to be a question of how it's portrayed. And I think some reporters do better than others. I think some publications do better than others. That's to be expected.

JANET BISHOP: Yes. And my favorite article I've read about you is-- I think POLITICO called you the Mad Man, the Don Draper, Dan Draper--

MASON TVERT: Don.

JANET BISHOP: --of marijuana. I'm not sure whether you agree or not?

MASON TVERT: Oh, no, that was a great article in definitely that it was a characterization that has certainly got a lot of attention.

JANET BISHOP: With your sunglasses and all.

MASON TVERT: Yeah, with the photo--

JANET BISHOP: Yeah, it definitely said--

MASON TVERT: --which we provided. I mean, I actually supplied them with it. That was taken by someone working on a documentary-- who was thinking about doing a documentary-- took that picture. We provided it. But yeah, ultimately, I talk to the media all day and try to provide them with information about this stuff, and to do it as objectively as possible.

And obviously there's going to be some level of bias just inherently. But we always really go out of our way to be as forthright as possible, to be as accurate as possible. Because from the time I
got started in this, it was very clear to me that that's the way to get the respect and to get the
coverage and to get the facts out there.

When it comes to you've got 23-year-old marijuana enthusiasts saying one thing and Mayor of
Denver saying another, you've kind of got an inherent lower hand in that debate when it comes to
talking to reporters. So over the course of several years, it was always very much a mission to be
as accurate as possible and to earn the trust of the media in Colorado, and now beyond Colorado.
But I think that we did a very good job.

And I think that from what we even heard, it ended up being the case with legislators during
implementation, is that I think over the course of time reporters have just started-- they're hearing
stuff from both sides of this argument frequently. And I think that we've generally come out on
top in terms of trustworthiness.

JANET BISHOP: Mhm. So specifically, I wanted to ask you about your assistance with the New
York Times. I happened to read the whole series that the Times did I believe in the summer of
2014, last summer, when the first batch of recreational marijuana had just been purchased,
consumed. And they ran a series of articles on Colorado, and the Colorado experiment, shall we
say.

MASON TVERT: Mhm.

JANET BISHOP: And you had mentioned to me as we were packing up our recorders last time
that you had helped in consulting with them. And could you tell me just a little bit about that
experience?

MASON TVERT: Yeah.

JANET BISHOP: And how they contacted?

MASON TVERT: Yeah. Really, that was a pretty big production on their part. So they, I believe,
had different writers, different members of their editorial staff taking on those different aspects. I
mean, they looked at the health effects. They looked at the arrests and crime. They looked at the
economic stuff. So they looked all these different areas of the issue.

And the individual who was looking at the health side had reached out and just said, can you
send me information about this or that? And then hey, I heard this. What do you have to say
about that, or can provide sources for this or that? And really just serving as a resource.

And that's generally what I do all day for all sorts of reporters. It could be anything from, can
you provide us with information about marijuana and the lungs? Or it could be like, could you
tell us how many states have passed medical marijuana laws, or how many states allow out-of-
state investors in their marijuana programs, any number of questions. And so yeah, I simply
answered the questions for that particular staffer. And yeah, I think they ended up doing a pretty
good piece.
JANET BISHOP: And did that create further interest from other established news sources? Or was that just part and parcel of your daily dissemination of information?

MASON TVERT: Obviously I try to be as responsive as possible to any media. But yeah, when it's the New York Times working on something, it's generally something that you'd try to make a priority.

JANET BISHOP: Right. Even my mother read that series too. So there you go. She lives in New Jersey. Lastly Mason, we've just-- or I've alluded to media coverage. And a lot of media coverage of Amendment 64 has been more in the impersonal voice, you know? This is what's going on in Colorado, et cetera. But the one very personalized piece I recall reading from a non-Colorado resident is Maureen Dowd's. I don't know if it was an op ed piece.

MASON TVERT: It's a column. Yeah, she's a columnist.

JANET BISHOP: Right. Her essay in the Times about when she checked into a hotel in Denver and her unfortunate marijuana experience. Can you tell me a little about what you thought about it at the time-- and do you know Maureen Dowd-- and what your take on her op ed piece was, and if it sort of hindered anything or helped anything or just was humorous?

MASON TVERT: Oh, well, so Maureen Dowd, essentially, she went and purchased a candy bar. And she was instructed to eat a certain amount. And she was instructed to wait a significant amount of time before eating more.

And she apparently ignored that advice. And she ended up eating more than she was told to eat. And then she didn't wait long enough to eat more of it after she had not felt the effects.

And so she had a very bad experience, which is an incredibly uncomfortable experience for anyone who's-- when it comes ingesting marijuana, it's very different from inhaling marijuana. And it affects you very differently. And it got a lot of attention, and to some extent, rightfully so.

I mean, a lot of people-- when it first came out, there were a lot of folks who viewed it as being a negative piece or something that was like an anti-marijuana piece or something that was trying to make it sound worse than it was. And I honestly didn't feel that way about it. I mean, do we want to see stories of people having a bad experience with marijuana? Of course not. But do we want people to be aware of how to avoid that type of thing? Absolutely.

And something that had been going on here in Colorado was discussion of how to educate people about these products. The marijuana businesses and some of the producers of the products have come together. And they've produced various pamphlets and inserts. And there's instructions on the packaging and so on. And so there's a lot being done.

But obviously, there's still a bit of a learning curve. And this was a perfect example. So while you never want to see anything like this happen, and it certainly wasn't helpful when it comes to assuring people that marijuana is something that can be used responsibly by adults, I think that
this was one of the most beneficial public education moments that we could have asked for, because did spark a lot of discussion.

And while some of it was, oh, she's criticizing marijuana, she's a prohibitionist, and some people were saying, look, marijuana is terrible, if you get that out of the way, those extreme views on both sides, and really look at what she wrote about, it's incredibly useful to hear someone's experience. And hopefully that will prevent other people from having the same experience.

Maureen Dowd is obviously a very intelligent person and an informed person. She found a marijuana store. She asked how much to consume. She could read the wrapper. She could-- all of this. And yet she still managed to screw it up. And that's based on the lack of inherent cultural knowledge.

No one really had to teach someone-- she didn't have to read a book or see a public service announcement to understand that she shouldn't order five martinis and just slam them all back. If Maureen Dowd had showed up at a hotel and said, give me a martini, drank it, and then said, well, I don't feel anything yet, give me another one, and just drank five more-- she would never do that because she knows better.

And when it came to marijuana, she didn't. And this really highlights that, that there's a need to inform people about this, because it has been in the dark for so long. And so we actually took advantage of it. And we put up a billboard. We launched a campaign.

JANET BISHOP: Another billboard, yeah.

MASON TVERT: Yeah, we launched a campaign called Consume Responsibly that had been-- we had received some civic support from some folks in the marijuana industry, a company called Medbox, that really wanted to help with that type of public education. So we launched this Consume Responsibly campaign with a billboard in Denver that had an image that appeared to be Maureen Dowd with her head in her hands.

And it said-- and she was sitting in what was clearly a hotel room. It said, don't let a candy bar ruin your vacation. With edibles, start low and go slow, meaning start with a low amount of THC and go very slowly in terms of increasing it.

JANET BISHOP: So was this billboard in the same venue that you had had other billboards when you were--

MASON TVERT: No, this one wasn't in any of the same specific spots, I don't believe. I mean, it was over on-- where was it? It was like Alameda and Federal-ish, maybe. I can't really remember exactly. But yeah, it got a lot of attention.

JANET BISHOP: And what month was this, or what year?

MASON TVERT: I mean, this was in 2014, I believe. Yeah.
JANET BISHOP: Yeah.

MASON TVERT: I would have to go back and look. I'm not sure exactly. But there was a whole website. And then we also had ads, some ads in marijuana-related publications, and some little business cards that stores could have that just steer people towards the website. So it gave people information on these products and warnings on how to consume responsibly and so on.

And so, you know, what was interesting is of course someone asked her for her opinion on it. So a reporter had reached her. And she said she loved it and that she thought it was great and that she was going to make it her Christmas card.

And I thought that that was great. Because some of the headlines were like, marijuana organization pokes fun at her or taunts. And I was like, not in the least. I mean, nothing about it was really poking fun. It was like taking this very well-known incident that had started a conversation and continuing the conversation.

So you know, it was definitely not meant to poke fun. And she certainly recognized that. And then we used it again later in the year. Since she had made the comment that she was going to make it her Christmas card, we actually made Christmas cards that were the same general theme. But in the background, it was kind of like a Christmas tree and a fireplace. And it said, don't let a candy bar ruin your holiday. And so--

JANET BISHOP: Did you send one to her?

MASON TVERT: --it got a little bit-- oh, we sent her one, yeah, at least to the New York Times, to their general mail and to her attention. And I've never spoken to personally. But yeah, and then that got some more attention. But yeah, I think that that is a good conversation to have.

And while again, it politically makes things difficult because you've got people on the other side, so to speak, trying to show that marijuana is terrible or that this is going to be horrible, jumping on that and saying, look, look at what happened, I think that we need to be jumping on it and saying look at what happened, but from the perspective of, let's use this opportunity to prevent it from happening with other people.

JANET BISHOP: Mhm. On a serious note, there have been conversations or alarm about, just as you say, individuals consuming edibles and having, say, unfortunate experiences. And I believe even a few tragedies have been blamed on young adults consuming edibles. I really wanted to spend these extra minutes talking about Maureen Dowd and talking to the media. But was part of this campaign too to educate young individuals as well and such?

MASON TVERT: Well, sure. I mean, it was generally to educate everyone, consumers in general, anyone who would be thinking about it. I mean, we want people to literally respect these products, to take this product and not view it as something that they could just eat and expect no consequences if they over-consume.
We certainly, while there are certainly no shortage of people binge drinking out there on college campuses, there is also at least some level of respect for alcohol, where a young person is not going to chug a bottle of vodka in its entirety, because they know that it could be problematic. So we want people to be hearing about this incident and thinking about it and not engaging in that type of behavior.

Does that mean that we'll never see someone accidentally over-consume or what have you? Of course it's bound to happen, just as it would be the case with anything. But we want to reduce the likelihood. And I think that so far that's been the case.

I mean, you look at-- one of the things that gets talked about are children accidentally consuming marijuana. And there are certainly some folks out there who have tried to really say, oh, my gosh, it's been this massive skyrocketing problem. And I think that-- I believe it was something like there were 145 calls.

It was roughly in that area of around 150 or so, less than 200, I believe, incidents involving someone calling poison control based on a child having consumed marijuana accidentally. In fact, I think that was overall total, not just children. And then children was an even smaller number.

But then you compare that to, say, the number of calls for children who have consumed cosmetics or something. It was like 1700. And vitamins was like 800. And so we've got to keep this in context. We're not trying to marginalize the potential problem. It's something that we need to be aware of. But we also need to keep it context.

JANET BISHOP: Mhm. Thank you, Mason. I think this is just about the extent of my additional questions I had for you. Do you have any other observations about working with media or any teaching moments similar to Maureen Dowd experience that you can think of?

MASON TVERT: You know, I've got all sorts of things that I could theoretically say about the media. But you know, by and large, yeah, it is what it is. And we do everything we can to try to make sure it's as accurate as possible. And that means I'm not trying to prevent a story about Maureen Dowd, but trying to ensure that the conversation is actually useful or balanced.

If we're going to talk about the people who are visiting the emergency room for marijuana, we need to also talk about in the context of well, how many people are visiting the emergency room on a daily basis for alcohol-related issues, which far, far, far, far exceeds those of marijuana. It's just always important to keep that context in mind. But what we're seeing is more an informed media than ever before, particularly in states like Colorado, where they are now having to follow this issue quite a bit.

JANET BISHOP: And then I guess only one last question is any difference between the national and international media or the international media? Have you had a lot of experience?

MASON TVERT: Generally speaking, the international media is typically more-- I don't want to necessarily say responsible, but generate less flamboyant about marijuana. The thing is that I
don't deal with a lot of international media. I deal with the very large-- excuse me. So there's a big difference between the BBC and then tabloids in the UK.

But when it comes to the BBC and then the CBC in Canada and these types of very large news services, the AFP in France, they are generally very good. And they're very much on par with NPR and the AP. But when it comes to doing radio or television, it's a world of difference in terms of the attitude or the general treatment that you get. It's far less about entertainment when it comes to doing something for the BBC or the CBC. It's far more like NPR than like CNN or Fox or even the networks. It is definitely a much more serious thing.

JANET BISHOP: OK, well, thank you, Mason.

MASON TVERT: Sure.

JANET BISHOP: Thank you so much for the additional smidgen of time. Again, it's December 7, 2015. We're wrapping up our additional 10, 15 minutes onto our 6 hours with Mason Tvert. Thank you so much. And this concludes, I think finally, our interview with Mason for our Stories of Amendment 64 Oral History Project. Thanks again.

MASON TVERT: Thank you.