

CHERYL MILLER

MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS SUFFERER. TIRELESS ADVOCATE DIED JUNE 7, 2003

Cheryl Miller was diagnosed with chronic, progressive Multiple Sclerosis (MS) in 1971. She tried all the medications that were prescribed for her, but many had such harmful side effects and were so toxic to her liver that she had to stop using them. Eventually she and her husband Jim heard that marijuana might help ease some of her symptoms, and they decided she should give it a try. As Cheryl had never smoked cannabis in her life and her MS made inhaling smoke intolerable, Jim added cannabis to a salad dressing so she could eat it. They were amazed how Cheryl's normally stiff-as-a-board body became relaxed and pliant. They became believers that cannabis was the best medicine for her pain, muscle stiffness, and spasms.

In 1992, Cheryl's neurologist prescribed the synthetic THC pill, Marinol, which replicates some of marijuana's effects. But as she said, and many other patients have found, "the THC pill helps, but not as much as eating marijuana." Research conducted by GW Pharmaceuticals in Great Britain has shown that this is due to the fact that the whole plant contains more than 80 cannabinoid compounds other than THC, and the combination of cannabinoids are more useful in treating many conditions than THC alone.

Soon after discovering the helpful properties of cannabis, the Millers became tireless activists in support of the legalization of marijuana for medical use. Beginning in 1993, after failed attempts to get lawmakers' attention to address this matter through lobbying, they found that protesting had more of an impact. Jim pushed Cheryl's wheelchair 58 miles across their state of New Jersey, and the media began to pay attention. In 1997, even though she had been homebound by her condition for over 10 years, she and her husband participated in that year's Boston-to-Washington "Wheelchair Crusade" for medical marijuana.

As Cheryl's MS progressed, they took their activism to the next level. In 1998, Cheryl and Jim committed an act of civil disobedience at Congressman Jim Rogan's (CA) office, to protest his vote in favor of House

Resolution 372, which stated that the U.S. House of Representatives is "unequivocally opposed to legalizing marijuana for medicinal use." At Rogan's office, Jim placed a small piece of food containing marijuana in Cheryl's mouth, and they were arrested for marijuana possession. The charges were later dropped.



In October 1999, when Rep. Bob Barr (GA) pushed through a bill to prevent citizens in Washington D.C. from having their votes counted after they passed a 1998 medical marijuana initiative, the Millers and other medical marijuana patients held a protest at Barr's office. Jim lifted Cheryl out of her chair and placed her in a sleeping bag in the doorway. Jim was arrested and charged with a misdemeanor for demonstrating in a Capitol building, but they opted not to charge Cheryl.

Even though Cheryl's health was deteriorating rapidly, Congressman Barr was on the receiving end of one of her last political acts. Televised throughout his home state of Georgia, Cheryl was featured in a political campaign commercial which ended with the question, "Why does Bob Barr want this woman in jail?" Barr was not re-elected.

Cheryl Miller died June 7, 2003 from pneumonia and other MS-related complications. She was 57 years old. As a tribute to Cheryl and her advocacy, her friends and supporters created the Cheryl Miller Memorial Project to continue her legacy. On September 22 and 23, 2003, medical marijuana patients and advocates went to Washington, DC to stage a candlelight vigil and day of congressional office visits to educate representatives about the realities that patients face each day.



Cheryl Miller with her husband and fellow-advocate, Jim Miller

Jim wrote the following tribute to his wife and best friend: "Cheryl made her life an open book so others could have a better life.... She was never afraid of the consequences of what we did to help fight medical marijuana prohibition....

"Cheryl's logic was this: There was nothing that law enforcement or the judicial system could do to her that would be worse than what MS was doing to her, and would

not last the lifetime that MS would last. She saw that her power to be an example increased proportionately with the level of her disability. By the time she could no longer move her arms or legs, Cheryl decided that it was time to go on an offensive in Washington DC."

Still a tireless advocate himself, Jim goes on to say, "What we call courage, Cheryl called faith. She knew that she could make a difference, and believed that the worst thing that could happen would be to do nothing at all. She was afraid of being able to help seriously ill people, and not doing so. She was a teacher, and I learned from her. I am learning still.

Jim Miller continues the fight in Cheryl's absence. In September 2003, he helped start the national Multiple Sclerosis Patients Union to advocate for other MS patients, in the hope that they may be spared some of the hardship Cheryl suffered.