

# Pot Czar

**Rising star Andrew Freedman  
is helping Colorado figure out  
the legalized marijuana business**

**By ANDREA JACOBS**

**Photos by TIM MCCLANAHAN**



# Navigating untested waters

**A**ndrew Freedman, the first person in the world to bear the auspicious title of marijuana czar, occupies a barebones office in the Colorado State Capitol Annex building on Sherman Street.

His official title is director of marijuana coordination for the State of Colorado, a new position he accepted in 2014 at the behest of Gov. John Hickenlooper.

The czar moniker conjures up a distorted image of the man himself, who is as brilliant and commanding as he is affable, humble and congenial.

His dream job is being chief of staff to the president of the United States, but it's not about prestige or power.

"I want to be the man *behind* the man — or the man *behind* the woman," he smiles.

When Freedman initially learned about the coordination spot, the 31-year-old Littleton native and Harvard Law School grad was between jobs and hesitant.

"I am a marijuana agnostic," he says of the unlikely marriage. "I was neither in the pro-marijuana category or the anti-marijuana category during the legalization process."

Freedman had just finished the governor's re-election campaign and was finally contemplating entering the legal profession when the governor's chief of staff Roxane White pulled him aside.

White told him the marijuana position was available and asked whether he was interested.

"I said I don't care that much about marijuana. It wasn't an issue for me either way. And she said that's exactly what they were looking for."

Campaign director of Colorado Commits to Kids from 2013-14 and Lt. Gov. Joe Garcia's chief of staff from 2010-2013, Freedman had already demonstrated his administrative acumen.

One comment White made sealed Freedman's decision to enter the untested policy waters of legalized recreational mar-



**Andrew Freedman ponders a question during the interview.**

ijuana, which passed with 54% of the vote in 2012.

"She said this is actually going to be about *good government*," Freedman says. "There's a lot that Colorado has to go through in a very short period of time. If we do it wrong, it's really going to hurt communities — and if we do it right, Colorado could really be a game changer here.

"So that's what convinced me. It was never a marijuana job. It was a good government job."

Tasked with implementing Amendments 20 (medical marijuana, passed in 2000) and Amendment 64 (recreational), Freedman works with 10 state departments, the governor's office and local communities under the watchful eye of the global media.

**O**ne of the team's chief priorities is maintaining public safety, public health and keeping marijuana out of the hands of kids. "That's our number one concern," Freedman says, "and there are many levels to it.

"The first is making sure that the regulatory systems we created prohibit selling marijuana to kids. All IDs are checked at the doors. We do sting operations, which reveal a 96% compliance rate — and we are not forgiving of the four percent

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that don't comply."

Businesses that fail to check IDs lose their licenses and are fined \$10,000. If they commit these infractions a second time, "we seriously consider permanently closing the stores," Freedman says.

Adults are permitted to smoke marijuana in their homes. You can't smoke outside, in your cars or in any public establishments.

Locating and determining effective youth prevention campaigns is an integral regulatory component "that is really difficult," Freedman says.

"We'll continue trying out evidence-based campaigns until we know what's striking the right chord."

For example, parents need information from current studies that shows marijuana's effect on children's mental functions, he says.

"We also must find the best method

of speaking directly to kids. They have goals in life — passing a test, getting a driver's license, asking a girl out on a

## 'The sky certainly has not fallen in the first 17 months'

date. Marijuana has been shown to get in the way of these goals."

The normalization of marijuana use probably won't affect 14-year-olds who already indulge, Freedman acknowledges. "They have their own views on the world.

"But what about a kid who is four years old now? What will he be like in 10 years? That will take 10 years to figure out."

This marijuana agnostic weighs all scenarios and extends his vision to a mutable future. He's aware of both the rewards and the risks.

"For us, the sky has certainly not fallen in the first 17 months of legalized recreational marijuana," Freedman says, adding no disaster befell Colorado during the prior 12 years of legalized medical marijuana.

"Denver looked roughly the same. This stability gave people enough faith to pass recreational marijuana.

"I think that more than anything, the move to legalize recreational marijuana was a rejection of the war on drugs. Polling numbers indicate that one out of five Coloradans actually partake."

The bill passed with 55% of the vote "yet over half of the people don't touch the stuff. Again, they were tired of business as usual."

There is no evidence that new peo-

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ple have picked up the marijuana habit since legalization, he stresses. “But that doesn’t mean we’re not looking down the road for long-term impacts we can’t see at the moment.”

**S**ome residents credit observable upticks in the state’s economy — long overdue neighborhood improvements, the flush housing market — to recreational marijuana tax revenue.

“Taxes are really the red herring of this whole thing,” says Freedman, who breaks down the numbers to clear up erroneous assumptions.

“Last year the legalized marijuana market amounted to \$700 million. The state brought in about \$63 million in tax revenue.

“It sounds like a lot of money. But the

## ‘Taxes are really the red herring of this whole thing’

state has a budget of \$26 billion. The income from marijuana isn’t enough to cover regulatory necessities.”

Ensuring businesses don’t sell marijuana to kids, putting more drug recognition experts on the streets to catch “high” drivers and funding school prevention and rehabilitation programs have a price.

Minus regulatory costs, Freedman says about \$40 million is left over to help public schools, which are specifically earmarked to benefit from recreational marijuana tax revenue.

“That’s about one school,” he says. “It’s not trivial, but it’s not enough to pave roads or pay teachers.

“Here’s what I say about it. Any state or country considering legalizing marijuana for the tax money would be doing

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**Freedman clears up false assumptions about tax revenue from recreational marijuana: ‘It’s not trivial, but it’s not enough to pave roads or pay teachers.’**

it for the wrong reasons.”

Freedman anticipates that once the recreational marijuana industry matures, which entails ending the black market and moving beyond medical marijuana, Colorado will peak at \$150 million in tax revenue in the coming years.

He’s very troubled that Colorado’s banking system generally declines large cash deposits from marijuana businesses, making them vulnerable to organized crime.

“Banking in Colorado is regulated by federal officials,” Freedman explains. “Although they have offered some guidance on how this money could be banked, they say it’s a risky situation.

“And since it’s risky, most financial institutions have decided not to bank it.”

The marijuana industry is a cash

business. Establishments keep money-lined vaults in their stores. Owners pay employees and vendors in cash.

“The way I see it, when you have that much cash lying around, it’s a recipe for

## ‘Having that much cash lying around is a recipe for crime’

violent crime,” Freedman says. “It’s also a recipe for organized crime.

“It wasn’t merely alcohol that contributed to organized crime during Prohibition. The biggest factor was cash and money laundering. It’s as old as Al Capone.

“If we force the legalized marijuana business to be in cash, we invite corrup-

tion into the system. It’s very concerning for me.”

**A** 2002 graduate of Cherry Creek High, Freedman was raised in a Reform family. He went to Shwayder Camp and attended Temple Sinai for the High Holidays and occasionally on Shabbat.

“I have a wonderful family,” he beams. “My mom Sari Freedman taught Spanish at RMHA for about 30 years. And she’s been the best political asset ever.”

When Freedman started working for Lt. Gov. Garcia, he was a 27-year-old unknown entity. “Everyone was trying to figure out what to make of me,” he laughs.

“So I brought my mom to a few events. She has this really kind soul and a sweet smile on her face. People ended

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## Louann and Myron (Micky) Miller

up liking me because they liked her so much.”

Dr. Robert Freedman, his father, is chair of psychiatry at the Anschutz Medical Center. “He’s a little bit like me — pretty cerebral but a very kind man.”

Freedman, who spent his junior year of college at Tufts-in-Oxford, received his BA in politics and philosophy *magna cum laude* from Tufts University in 2006.

Already accepted by Harvard Law School, he took a year off between Tufts and Harvard to explore the planet.

He worked on an organic farm in Ireland, volunteered for Building Bridges for Peace in Jerusalem, went to Japan, worked at a women’s rights center in Thailand and taught English and math in India.

Freedman earned his JD from Harvard Law in 2010.

“I chose law because I saw it as the language of change and took philosophy to learn what was right. I had no idea that I was going to be world’s first marijuana czar.”

His desire to assist strangers in strange lands stems from his upbringing, which he describes as “very privileged. In a way, money was important to me, but it wasn’t the meaning of life. I also watched how my mom and dad helped others in their respective jobs.

“I thought the best thing you could do was to leave people in a happier place than when you found them.”

Freedman, who has never utilized his law degree, says his father told him to turn down the job as Garcia’s chief of staff in 2010 “because I had just graduated law school.

“He thought I needed to do a residency in law. Since he’s a doctor I understood why he said this, but I explained it didn’t work that way.”

Freedman, who has a girlfriend, says his dedication to the job will preclude marriage for a while longer.

Five years have passed since Freedman obtained his JD. For a young

## ‘I chose law because I saw it as the language of change’

man, that’s a long time. “But what I’ve discovered is that I really enjoy leading teams through complex situations more than anything.

“And I’m committed to social justice. Early childhood education and education in general have always mattered to me because they give people equal opportunities to pursue their passions.

“Being free and empowered is everything.”

**T**he good-hearted, steely-brained marijuana czar has been in his post for one year and five months — and he’ll stick with it for at least another year.

“It’s a hard job,” Freedman says of the heavily invested pro- and anti-marijuana emotions on all sides.

“There are people who make their living in marijuana and fear you’ll take away their livelihood.

“Conversely, there are parents who worry that we’re not protecting their children.” Listening skills, he emphasizes, are crucial.

“As someone who has seen politics work and fail, I think we have lost the art of listening and go directly to the game we’re in the middle of playing,” he says. “You see it in national, state and local politics.

“If we could just sit down 99% of the time and talk to the other person and come up with something that works for both of us, it would be great. Instead we only do this five percent of the time.

“But this would be my hope. All we’re trying to do is listen to everyone’s dreams and desires and figure out what we can do for each other.”

Asked about future plans, Freedman pauses.

“It wouldn’t have to be about marijuana,” he says candidly. “If I never held a marijuana job again it wouldn’t upset me. But I’d be interested in being involved with a hard complex issue that we must work through together, and can make a difference if we do it right.”

On Jan. 11, 2015, Freedman appeared on a “60 Minutes” broadcast about legalized recreational marijuana in Colorado. Correspondent Bill Whitaker came to Denver to interview him.

“He called me ‘baby-faced,’” Freedman laughs. “It was the very first thing he said about me. I’m walking up the steps with Whitaker and he says, ‘This baby-faced 31-year-old . . .’ and I’m thinking oh my G-d.”

Despite his age and youthful appearance, Freedman is no longer that unknown quantity that mystified people at political events. He’s a wise realist whose ability to ponder the big picture holds the sky in place.

“No, I don’t think we’re a model for the nation in terms of legalized marijuana,” he responds to a question. “I think a better way to put it is that we’re a lesson for the nation. I can’t tell you exactly how that lesson is going end up, but we’re trying intentionally and in good faith to make this a success.

“If we fail, that’s a lesson for everybody. And if we succeed, that’s also a lesson for everybody.”

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