

MONTEL WILLIAMS

MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS PATIENT AND MEDICAL MARIJUANA ADVOCATE, BUSTED IN THE DETROIT MICHIGAN AIRPORT

Nationally syndicated television talk-show host Montel Williams is a criminal, but not by choice. Diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis in the mid '90s, he tried all the standard pain medications to deal with the intense nerve pain and muscle spasms that wrack his body. Extreme neuralgic pain from his shins to his toes afflicts him every day with a sensation he describes as like “slamming your crazy bone on something, that initial thing that hurts, then multiply that by about 50. I have that every day. When it’s bad, I have it by about 100 and sometimes it even gets worse than that.”

To cope with that pain Montel has been prescribed pain medication from Vicodin to Percocet to OxyContin to morphine, but the side effects were not only physically intolerable, they began to take a toll on his spirit, propelling him into the depression that further devastates many people with intractable, incurable chronic pain. Things got bad enough at one point that Montel came close to suicide, holding a gun in his hand, contemplating ending it all. But the thought of his children and family brought him back, giving him the courage to carry on in the search for better ways to treat his debilitating disease.

As he puts it, “The last alternative left? Medical marijuana. In fact, marijuana has helped my symptoms so much that I have become an advocate for the legalization of medical marijuana for qualified patients like me—those suffering from debilitating and/or devastatingly painful diseases.”

Montel has recommendations to use marijuana from doctors in several states—including California, where he owns property—but he works out of New York where there is currently no medical marijuana law and travels extensively.

In November 2003, Montel got detained in the Detroit Metro Airport after baggage screeners found paraphernalia and what they claimed to be a small amount of marijuana. Montel denies that he was traveling with any mar-

ijuana, and airport officials decided to cite him only for the paraphernalia possession, saying "We don't want to damage his reputation. Montel Williams may or may not have broken any law." In fact, Michigan has no medical marijuana law either, and possessing even trace amounts of marijuana there can mean up to a year in jail. But celebrity has its rewards, and Montel was only cited, fined \$100, and sent on his way.



A spokesperson for Montel released this statement the day after the incident: "Montel Williams has been very open about his battle with MS in the hope of raising awareness and helping others. He has prescriptions for many different medications for MS, some of which manage his pain, which is constant. One of the medications he has been prescribed to alleviate his chronic pain is medical marijuana.... The fight for compassionate care and medical marijuana is one that Mr. Williams is very passionate about and one that he continues to advocate."

Since then, Montel has become even more of an advocate. His latest book, *Climbing Higher*, has a chapter on his medical marijuana use called "In the Eyes of the Law, I'm a Criminal," in which he calls for change in the federal prohibition and real research initiatives. He hosted a segment on his nationally syndicated show about medical marijuana and federal law, what he called "the political war on drugs."

And in May of 2004, Montel took his story to the New York legislature, which has been considering passing a medical marijuana law. He was persuasive. After his visit, the leader of the state senate publicly reversed his position on the issue, coming out in support of the bill.

"I'm breaking the law every day, and I will continue to break the law," Montel said at a press conference while he was in Albany lobbying the legislature. He told the press that he uses marijuana every night to control his MS symptoms. "Because I do not condone breaking any law, I would like to see all 50 states and the federal government decriminalize medical marijuana. I would also like to see more research into its effects on MS—for the treatment of pain and spasticity," he said. "I know we can build a future of hope and health, and together we're going to win."