

Rodney Dangerfield and his Romance with Marijuana

by Joan Dangerfield

Rodney had a fantastically unique mind. Few people knew he was a mathematical genius, but everyone knew he was hilarious. His humor was a razor thrust into social hypocrisy and the little injustices of life. He wrote "killers" and made the world laugh.



Another thing that was not widely known about Rodney is that he endured quite a bit of personal suffering in his life. He was heartbreakingly neglected as a child. We've all heard the expression "the tears of a clown," and in many ways Rodney embodied that experience. Like most geniuses, the special chemistry that created his remarkable mind also created certain psychological challenges. Acute anxiety and manic depression were congenital issues that plagued Rodney's life.

To give you an idea of how his anxiety would manifest itself, Rodney couldn't sit still. In *Caddyshack*, his character, Al Cervic, is constantly fidgeting like he's about to burst out of his skin. The truth is, this was no act. Rodney was under duress. He felt Chevy Chase was talking too slowly and it got on his nerves. Rodney's impatience would come out through his body. The pace of the whole world was too slow for him until he found marijuana.

Rodney first lit up back in 1942 when he was 21. He was hanging out with a comic named Bobby Byron and his friend Joe E. Ross –some of you might remember Joe E. Ross from *Car 54*. They went to the Belvedere Hotel in New York where Bobby lived. The night would prove to have such an impact on Rodney's life that he even remembered the room number they were in –1411.



Although he was supposed to be enjoying himself with friends, Rodney was characteristically agitated and anxiety ridden. It's how he felt every day of his life to that point. But when Rodney got high, he couldn't believe it. For the first time in his life, he left relaxed and peaceful, and had a sense of well-being. That night marijuana became a new friend that would be in Rodney's life for the next 62 years.



I met Rodney in 1983, and after a 10-year courtship, Rodney and I enjoyed 11 years of marriage. I must admit that when I became a part of Rodney's life, I did not approve of his marijuana use. My Mormon background hadn't given me experience with any illegal substances and I was always afraid Rodney would get arrested.

Rodney was concerned about my feelings and agreed to look for legal alternatives to treat his ailments. Over the years we consulted the best experts we could find in search of legal anti-anxiety and pain medications and even tried Marinol. But nothing worked for him the way real marijuana did.

A couple of years ago Rodney was in the process of writing his autobiography, in which he wanted to be very candid about everything in his life. He even wanted to title the book "My Lifelong Romance with Marijuana." I was sure then that Rodney would be arrested. So I looked for, and found, Dr. David Bearman here in Santa Barbara.

Dr. Bearman examined Rodney and obtained records from Rodney's other doctors for review. In addition to his anxiety and depression, at the time Rodney's medical conditions included constant pain from the congenital fusion of his spine, an inoperable dislocated shoulder and rotator-cuff tear and arthritis. Rodney wasn't able to take traditional pain medications because of their interactions with his blood-thinning medication, Coumadin.

We were elated a few days after that initial visit with Dr. Bearman when Rodney's medicinal use was approved. Rodney showed the approval letter to everyone and carried miniature versions in his pockets. Ever the

worried wife, I included a copy of the letter in the memory box of his casket in case the feds were waiting for him at the Pearly Gates.

Even though Rodney endured numerous health challenges over the years, including aneurysms, heart surgeries and a brain bypass, he remained active and vital during his last incredible year. He swam regularly, went on a multi-city press tour to promote his best-selling book (the publisher made him change the title to "It's Not Easy Bein' Me"), recorded an album of love songs called "Romeo Rodney," and wrote countless new jokes. After all those years of pot smoking, his memory and his joke-writing ability did not suffer and his lungs were okay. He was as sharp as ever.

Even moments after brain surgery Rodney didn't miss a beat. Rodney's doctor came to his bedside after he was taken off the respirator. He said, "Rodney, are you coughing up much?" And Rodney said, "Last week, five-hundred for a hooker."

Some of you may be aware that 4:20 is a symbolic time of day for many marijuana enthusiasts. About a year after Rodney's brain surgery, he had heart surgery and due to complications his life ended... Coincidentally, or perhaps meaningfully, at 4:20 p.m. EST.

