

Trading My Grinder and Papers For Some Green Scrubs

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Sam Bergman, 22, is a native New Yorker who has lived in the Bronx his whole life. Today, Bergman rarely smokes cannabis, but in his adolescence, it was a common occurrence, especially throughout his high school years. Bergman had an encounter with the law which involved possessing a large amount of weed.

In January of 2015, the then-14 year old Bergman had only been smoking consistently for a few months as he and his peers would indulge in the act before and after school several days a week. One day before school Bergman, and two of his friends (Jon Kaplan and Samuel Murray) decided to pool together some funds to buy an ounce of marijuana to save them money in the long run.

An ounce (roughly 28 grams) of good weed usually ranges around \$150-\$250; you usually get more bang for your buck when you purchase this amount.

This was the first time Bergman had decided to buy this much weed at once but realized the benefits of the decision as paying \$10[1 gram] for dime bags and \$20[2 grams] dub bags multiple times a week was taking a toll on his funds. The night before Bergman, Kaplan, and Murray hit up their dealer who they had been buying from for a few months and was pretty reliable when it came to serving them. However, he was only available in the mornings before school. Bergman, Kaplan, and Murray would usually have to bring the weed with them inside Riverdale Kingsbridge Academy, a school located in the North Bronx.

After purchasing the cannabis Bergman, Kaplan, and Murray came to school 30 minutes late to be on the safe side and not cause attention from the deans who would wait at the entrance of the school in the mornings. Kaplan went in first and signed the late log while Bergman and Murray strolled in five minutes behind him and then proceeded to their first period classes. Before entering the building, they realized the stench of the plant would draw attention to them

in a small classroom as they attempted to wrap it in a plastic bag and mask the smell. Bergman decided to be the one who was going to carry the weed around all day in his bag as they had no time before school to split the ounce into thirds. When Bergman arrived at his first period class all went smoothly as he wasn't certain how bad the smell actually was.

It wasn't until midway through his second period Spanish class where he registered that his backpack was reeking and realized he had to do something about it immediately. On that day there was a test for the class which put Bergman in an even worse situation as the teacher was walking around constantly. After other students and the teacher realized that the room had acquired this new odor she narrowed it down to the corner where Bergman was sitting. She didn't confront him herself but rather called a dean in as Bergman was asked to pick up his bag and take his belongings to the main office.

When Bergman arrived at the office, he realized how bad this situation was as he was greeted by two other deans, the principal, and a school security guard. After being questioned if he had anything in his bag, and denying every question thrown at him, the principal of the school, Lori O'Mara, ordered the security guard to search his bag.

Officer Seabrook had been working at the school for nearly two decades as he knew Bergman from his years in middle school. Officer Seabrook had a reputation of caring for students and giving them second chances as he was seen as a role model of sorts to many kids who were viewed as delinquents or juveniles.

After conducting a frisk and search, going through his bag, and rummaging through all of his coat pockets, officer Seabrook claimed he couldn't find anything. However, O'Mara wasn't satisfied with that answer as the stench had now filled the entire main office on the first floor of the high school. Reluctantly, Seabrook whipped out the bag which contained the ounce and

placed it on the table for all to see. Immediately, questions were thrown in Bergman's direction from all ends of the table.

“Do you have anything else on you?”

“Where did you get it from?”

“Who was there when you got it?”

“Who did you walk into school with today?”

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The term “gateway drug” is often used by critics of marijuana legalization as it is believed to lead to stronger drug use in the future. This has ultimately been proven false, as Timothy J. Legg, PhD and Sian Ferguson state, “as many people do use cannabis before using other substances, that alone isn't proof that cannabis use caused them to do other drugs.” Not only is it rumored to be the cause of more drug use in the future but a life of bad decisions and poor judgment. However, one thing about marijuana that's not a rumor is the addiction aspect of the plant, and the effects it has on people who stop after being longtime users. Using weed recreationally can become a problem when it starts bringing issues into somebody's life and starts affecting others around them. It's not addictive as alcohol and opioids, so it gets pushed to the side majority of the time, but it is very easy to fall into the cycle using it to cope with life's challenges. When people think of redeeming themselves, they usually think about the thing they did to others for an act they've committed.

However, in cases like Sam's, redemption is more of an internal battle, as choices he made put him in a situation that would ultimately shape his life and lead him down a route he never saw coming.

Bergman's father, Jerome Bergman, is a native New Yorker and his mother, Myrna Addog Bergman, was an immigrant who came here from the Philippines in 1999; the two met in Hong Kong a year before. Growing up in the Van Cortlandt area of the Bronx, the younger Bergman was in an environment that truly embodied city life. He would take public transportation with his mom to get everywhere, he lived right across the street from one of New York's biggest parks (Van Cortlandt), and he went to P.S. 81, right on the borderline of Yonkers. Bergman's father was a constant cannabis smoker, as he would smoke almost every day. Sam, too, started smoking at a young age, feeling that the properties of the plant would help him with anxiety. Outside of his father, his only exposure to cannabis was slight whiffs here and there from his buildings hallways and courtyard.

When you hear the name Sam Bergman you might assume right away that he is a white Jewish boy. However, that is not the case, as Bergman has a very dark complexion from his mother's side. People have always mistaken him to be Hispanic. Growing up in an extremely Spanish neighborhood filled with Caribbean and Central American culture, he would always get stunned reactions when he couldn't respond to people speaking Spanish to him in the street.

In 2012, Bergman moved to Riverdale, a small neighborhood in the Bronx that borders the Hudson River, as his parents bought an apartment a few blocks from his middle school. His mother was now a home health aide, helping people all over the five boroughs. However, when it came to his father, things were a little different. Jerome Bergman was 51 years old when Sam was born, and by the time he was in middle school, the elder Bergman was experiencing some health issues mentally and physically. He had severe asthma and anemia, which affected his everyday life since he was a young man. In his later years he developed congestive heart failure (CHF) and chronic kidney disease (CKD), which eventually forced him to stop working.

When Sam was growing up, his father worked as a cab driver and taught classical music. The elder Bergman was a skilled classical pianist and violinist for most of his life, which earned him jobs with orchestras such as the New Jersey Symphony (1970-1979). A perfectionist at his craft, Jerome would practice for hours a day, as the Bergman household was filled with classical music constantly throughout Sam's childhood. Jerome taught Sam the basics of piano, which eventually inspired him to start reading and playing full pieces of music at one point in his life. But by the time Bergman was about to start high school, his dad was no longer working, as he suffered a stroke.

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“I have nothing else on me.”

“I don't know who I got it from.”

“I was with nobody earlier.”

Bergman was being pressured by everyone in the room to start talking, as he realized that he may be in some serious trouble. When asked who he came into school with Bergman knew he couldn't get away with lying to the people in the office as a camera had shown all three boys together before school. In addition, their names were close to each other in the late sign-in sheet from the morning – their plan to come in late backfired drastically. Bergman assumed both Kaplan and Murray didn't have anything incriminating in their bags, as he told Principal O'Mara who else he came into school with. Hoping the one truth he told would help him get out of this situation without endangering his friends, Bergman was told to go back to class after being held for a few more questions.

At lunch the three boys met up to discuss what had happened. Kaplan said he got pulled from class and searched as they found nothing substantial. Murray also got pulled from class and

searched. When checking his bag, they found an empty blunt wrap and a dime bag of shake. The three of them knew some form of punishment would be coming their way – they just didn't know to what extent. When Bergman got home his mother received a suspension hearing along with a pamphlet outlining how the procedures are carried out. Murray also received this and was scheduled to attend a suspension hearing, which would take place in the same location and on the same date as Bergman's. Kaplan was free of any punishment even though he was seen on the cameras with them; he had nothing incriminating on him at the time of being searched. All three boys were in trouble with their parents at the time, as they kept low the next few days before the hearing, going straight to school and heading back home right after.

In the pamphlet, there was a section on how to get free legal aid to help in cases like these. In the days leading up to the hearing, Bergman and his mother met with two law students who were a part of a clinic that takes academic disciplinary cases. On the day of the hearing Bergman noticed Murray came with no legal representation, just his mother, even though he, too, received the packet to get free help. Bergman went first as he, his mother, and the law students entered the room. Representing Riverdale Kingsbridge Academy were two deans who had control of the high school, Vincent Cuomo and Sheilagh Lustig. Cuomo was the head dean of the high school at the time. ( His tenure at the school reached almost four decades after his retirement in 2019.) Lustig at the time was the high school testing coordinator who today has been promoted to assistant principal.

Bergman's legal aides "were aggressive from the start, as their first move was pointing out the fact that Mr. Cuomo was not actually physically there for the incident, and insisted that he leave the room," Bergman said.

The hearing official allowed this, and it was suddenly a staggering four on one showdown of sorts. Lustig stood at one end of the table as Bergman, his mother and the law students stood on the other. After the whole situation was depicted from both sides, the hearing official asked what the school's proposal was for Bergman's suspension. Lustig replied that Principal O'Mara was pushing for 90 days out of school.

The hearing official immediately rejected that proposal. Instead, as punishment, Bergman received a week at Jane Addams High School in the South Bronx.

"I believe I got the best possible outcome from this, and it was purely due to the legal aid I had that day," Bergman stated on how he felt leaving the room. It was a huge sigh of relief that he got the minimum punishment for carrying an ounce of weed into a public school.

Bergman didn't stick around for Murray's hearing verdict, but later found out Murray got the full 90-day out of school suspension, which he would be doing at Herbert H. Lehman High School.

"Both the alternative schools we attended were in considerably worse areas of the Bronx," Bergman said, "and classes were held in trailers next to the actual schools."

He added that the conditions of these trailers were pretty "rigid," as learning was difficult, and students were only taught about three subjects a day. "Nearly all of the students in the trailers were suspended for either fighting other students or fighting their teachers at their original schools, and most of them had been suspended several times previously."

Bergman knew that he didn't belong in that small trailer in the South Bronx with these students, who had violent tendencies; the week he served was the beginning of a wakeup call, but he kept oversleeping his alarm.

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In the 1970s marijuana was viewed as one of the leading factors that made New York such a dangerous place as then-Gov. Nelson Rockefeller and the New York state legislature placed extremely harsh laws throughout the decade, which led to people doing a lot of prison time. Approximately more than 23,000 people from 1973-2008 were incarcerated for marijuana-related crimes under these laws at the peak of enforcement, according to “We are the Drug Policy Alliance.” Of those, 66% had previously never been to prison, and 80% have never been convicted of a violent felony. Laws against possession and smoking that, in the present day, would be looked at as little to nothing were at times rigidly enforced, and used as a pretext for cleaning the city’s image. And they were most commonly used against people of color in lower income neighborhoods all over the city.

After this incident Sam was still smoking cannabis but became a lot more cautious of how it was perceived from the outside, because at the time weed was still illegal in New York. Unfortunately, people still associate weed as a schedule one drug, according to the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA). It states:

“The drug or other substance has a high potential for abuse. The drug or other substance has no currently accepted medical treatment use in the U.S. It has a lack of accepted safety for use under medical supervision.”

Medical officials, legislators and voters in individual states have taken a different view since as far back as 1996, when California became the first state to legalize weed for medical use. There are now 37 states, and the District of Columbia, that allow for medical marijuana. Since 2012, voters in states have begun to legalize cannabis for recreational use, when Washington state and Colorado became the first states to do so. There are 22 states, plus D.C.,

that now allow recreational use, according to a chart posted on DISA. com. New York legalized recreational weed in 2021.

As Bergman continued throughout high school, he kept coming into unnecessary encounters strictly based on one main variable, weed. When he was 17, he was cited by two NYPD officers at the Spuyten Duyvil train station in the Bronx for smoking on the platform. He had to go to court to dispute a ticket that was on his personal record. He got the ticket thrown out as he went to the Bronx County Hall of Justice with his mother as the judge told him to stay out of trouble and to consider this a warning. Throughout high school, Bergman got into a few physical altercations which involved either the selling or possessing cannabis.

“Nothing serious ever really came out of it but it started to take its toll on my mind,” he said. “Almost every situation where I’ve been put at risk stemmed from marijuana.”

As high school started coming to an end, Bergman realized his future could be jeopardized by the decisions he made and the people he surrounded himself with. By the end of high school, he kept a select few people close to him as he got accepted into Hunter College, where he began his journey into the medical field, studying psychology.

While in his first year of college, Bergman was commuting every day, taking three subways to get to Hunter. He became close with people he met in his major; this led to a comfortability to smoke after class with them.

“On the surface there was no real issue,” he said, “but deep down inside I knew what I was doing traced back to exactly the same habits and routines I was following in high school.”

After a subpar first semester at Hunter Bergmans second semester of college was cut short as Covid hit New York City. He had to quarantine at all times of the day as he couldn't take a chance getting his father sick, as his heart, lung, and kidney conditions made him extremely high

risk for infection. Sam only left the house to get groceries and medicine those first few months of the pandemic as he finished his semester over Zoom. During this time, Bergman quit smoking weed as he wanted to take a step in the right direction – the state of the world made him second-guess where he was at mentally.

“I had to sober up,” he said. “I cut out all the drugs I was depending on, from weed to Xanax and Adderall. I had to get right with myself. Even the CBD I was using to try to slowly wean myself off from smoking weed was pushed to the side as I had to go cold turkey.”

During this stage of getting clean, Bergman experienced symptoms of withdrawal, which he described as “one of the worst feelings a person could have.” Tossing and turning at night, sweating uncontrollably and not eating, along with constant mood swings, were just some of the things Bergman experienced in that week when his body was feeling the full effects of the process. At the end of this process where his body and mind were no longer relying on substances on a daily basis Bergman knew he made the right decision. He knew this would not only benefit himself in the present but his future was looking more secure than it had ever been in his life.

Bergman soon after found Christ Disciples International Ministries, a pantry that gave him one of his first opportunities to see what it’s really like to help people. Bergman volunteered there for a year and a half as he showed up twice a week to the small church located at 399 E Mosholu Pkwy in the Bronx in an area he described as “one that many people tend to have overlooked when it comes to real struggle in the city.” In the middle of August 2020 when Bergman was working one of the homeless men strolled in, skipping the line trying to dap up and give handshakes out to others on the line. Of course at the time Covid had its grip around life as we knew it as no one on the line wanted to touch the man or even interact with him. With social

distancing protocols in full effect he was making everybody who wanted food very uncomfortable, as a static started to rise on the line people began to get defensive. Bergman saw what was happening and went over to ease the situation as he saw the guy meant no harm at all.

“I asked him if he needed help with anything as I started walking toward the man and then all of a sudden... he swung at me,” Bergman stated when encountering the man. “At first I’m thinking okay whatever this man just got startled and needs to go, but then I see the shank in his hand and everybody’s jaw dropped as I looked down and my shirt was drenched in blood.”

Initially Bergman didn’t feel any pain as the heat of the moment had his mind rushing in a million different directions. The homeless man ran out immediately after the incident, but two police officers who were casually posted up outside of the church tackled the man and took him away as no one ever knew what happened to him afterwards. Bergman got driven to the emergency room by the program director as he received stitches for his wound. “My biggest concern was diseases the shank could have contained, not necessarily the damage it did to my skin “ Bergman stated when talking about the incident as the weapon was extremely dirty and covered in rust. After being cleared from the hospital Bergman took a few days off but a week later returned to helping those at the pantry, as many people thought he would never return after his encounter with the homeless man.

As he continued to boost his GPA after a slow freshman year, Bergman stood consistently busy outside of school working and volunteering as much as he could. This includes being an ambulatory surgery center liaison at H.S.S (Hospital for Special Surgery), in which he does a multitude of things. From helping patients check in before surgery, to helping transport patients from the pre operative and post anesthesia care units while providing timely updates to family members, Bergman has been doing this for almost two years now. He has also been a research

associate for Weill Cornell Medicine since October of 2021 as his role there consists of interviewing patients for participation in clinical emergency medicine research, along with ensuring compliance with IRB (institutional review boards) human subjects protocol. Outside of the medical field Bergman was a teaching assistant in the psychology department at Hunter his junior year, following that up with tutoring organic chemistry for the school as well.

When weed was legalized in New York on March 30 2021, many people seemed to have shown support for the movement in which the state was heading toward, as Bergman the one time stoner of sorts fell right under this category.

“This is honestly so well overdue,” Bergman said with a big smile on his face. “The positives clearly outweigh the negatives, as I believe a ton of people will benefit financially from this cannabis boom we are experiencing right now.”

Almost immediately after arrests started to plummet in the city as the demographic that already started to drop sank to single digits in the first few months of legalization in 2021. In the first quarter during this year 163 people in New York City alone were arrested for possession charges, after the passing of the bill in March second quarter came to an end as this dropped to only eight people being placed under arrest, according to an article in Filtermag.org.

“It still hasn’t really sunk in yet how drastic the change of the law is,” Bergman stated. “When I’m heading toward the 1 train in the morning and I see somebody smoking literally six feet in front of a cop I always get a little nervous at first glance. Literally three years ago that same person would be integrated, ticketed, and possibly even arrested for a single joint. Depending on their background of course...”

In 2020 black and brown New York City residents were the most targeted group by far, making up over 94% of arrests alone, according to reports in AM New York.

With Bergman a few weeks away from getting his bachelor's degree, the road is still far from over. With countless hours of working and volunteering on top of school Sam has put himself in a position to succeed if the next steps into medicine becoming a full time nurse are going to happen. Bergman will be applying to medical schools within the next eight to ten months after graduation, as he still has a lot of preparation to do.

“I’m going to try to apply to around 50 medical schools, but gonna shoot for ones in New York as the price dramatically increases once you start venturing out of your state,” Bergman stated when talking about the application process. “You must be in the ninetieth percentile if you even want to stand a chance as you are competing with so many people from all over the world taking the MCAT.”

The medical college admission test is one of the hardest tests to pass as it is one of the toughest graduate school entrance exams in the whole nation. People study all year around for this test as it determines if you can take the next steps into the professional medical field. If you can pass the rigorous test you then have to apply for schools which consist of having an outstanding resume, letters of recommendations, and interviews that make you stand out from others competing for spots. By January 15th 2024, Bergman would have submitted everything from his school to endorse him gathering these variables in the most comprehensive way possible.

“It would all be for nothing if I fail a drug test,” Bergman said when talking about his decision on staying away from weed recreationally in the near future. “Trust me it happens to people, they get into medical school, they get to the point where they need to find a job, and just like that, they fail the test as it stains their resume forever.” A defeat that is extremely difficult to

mentally come back from after putting in almost a decade of preparation, all for it to be shot down by dirty urine.

“I’m so proud to see where Sam is now, he has been through a lot and I’ve seen him take on adversity like no one I’ve seen before.” Astrid Carr, Sam’s childhood friend, stated about where he is now in life.

“Sam and I weren’t even that cool from middle school till like midway high school, but our friendship grew afterward as I saw him mature. Every time I get back from college and we haven’t seen each other for four or five months it’s like nothing has changed.” Dylan Judin said about one of his good friends in Bergman.”

Miles Bowden used to be one of Bergmans closest smoking buddies as their friendship goes pretty far back. “We used to hang out literally all the time for nearly six years straight before I moved to Phoenix,” he recalled when talking about their friendship. “I know it was hard when we would smoke next to him during that period of when he stopped, but he stood strong as his strength in doing so probably has helped him to be in the position he’s in today.”

As of today Bergman still smokes on special occasions but has been able to seemingly control his desire to smoke by himself on a daily basis. As the person he was once in his teenage years does not define who is anymore.

*Source List*

Sam Bergman: November 10 2022, February 7 2023, March 25 2023, April 4 2023; main source; [sambergman51@gmail.com](mailto:sambergman51@gmail.com)

Miles Bowden: April 15 2023; Sams long time smoking buddy throughout middle school and highschool; [MSBow57@icloud.com](mailto:MSBow57@icloud.com)

Astrid Carr: April 12 2023; Sams close friend friend from the neighborhood whose known him for a decade; [Carra6@newpaltz.edu](mailto:Carra6@newpaltz.edu)

Dylan Judin: April 16 2023: A friend of Sams who got close in recent years; [djudin315@gmail.com](mailto:djudin315@gmail.com)



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