

Not Sold In Stores: A Drug Dealer's Story

ZACK FREDERICK

WRITER'S COMMENT: When Professor Demory assigned our class the task of profiling an individual, the idea immediately came to me to write about a childhood friend who had become a drug dealer. Fortunately, my subject was eager to talk about the "trade" and was open about many important details that helped flesh out the essay. I owe him many thanks—this essay practically wrote itself with his help. I also must thank Professor Demory for encouraging creativity and originality in her assignments. And so, after hours of phone interviews, note-taking, and writing, this essay finally came together. Its intention is to be a portrait of the day-job drug dealer; a snapshot of both the intimate personal and financial details of my subject's life combined with the greater societal and economic realities of the drug trade. Hopefully, readers come away with a little more knowledge about the suburban aspects of America's drug issues and, furthermore, an open-mindedness that is the first step in beginning to talk about the amazingly complex and at times hypocritical and dangerous attitudes about drug use in America.

—Zack Frederick

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: The first trick to writing a good profile is finding someone interesting to interview. The second trick is to write the piece in a way that brings the reader in—allows us to see and hear the person, to get an idea of what makes him tick. Zack's essay succeeds on both counts—through an accumulation of telling detail and the subject's own matter-of-fact words, he opens up to us the world of the suburban drug dealer—in all its mundane ordinariness. He lets us see Alex the dealer more or less as wants to be seen—he lets the reader make up his or her own mind about whether Alex himself should or should not be looked down upon for his work. But Zack is not so forgiving about the social, political, and economic institutions that bolster Alex's activities. And here's where Zack illustrates the third trick to writing a really good profile: analysis. It's not enough to describe your subject—at some point you have to stick out your neck and answer the big "So what?" question. And this is where the essay takes a turn, from clever portrait to biting argument.

—Pamela Demory, University Writing Program

THINK of the stereotypical drug deal—the one you’ve seen on TV and in the movies a million times before—where the two parties meet in an abandoned warehouse and make the tense exchange. The camera moves slowly, emphasizing the tension in the room, as the city’s pollution chokes the brown air. A fight could break out at any time, the risk is tremendous for both buyer and seller—one small miscalculation could result in bloodshed. As exciting and dramatic as this may appear, it is often far removed from reality. It would be more accurate (and accordingly less dramatic) if one were to replace the urban warehouse with a middle class home, and the city with American suburbia. Make the tension into bland conversation and replace the “drug deal” with a more business-like exchange. Now you have the hidden reality of drug use and drug dealing that conceals itself just beyond the white-picket fences and financial security of middle class American society.

Alex Phillips is not your stereotypical drug dealer. Growing up in the liberal haven of northern California’s Sonoma County, Alex’s life has been shaped, not by poverty and desperation, but by safety, security, and a general sense of well-being. He does not give off the feelings of resentment towards society that characterize many other rebellious teenagers. Alex is tall and white, with a calm and witty demeanor about him. His wavy hair is shaggy around the edges, imitated below his chin by the wispy beard that frames his face. He dresses mostly in black, or jeans and a hoodie, listens to heavy metal (Tool, Black Sabbath), loves to drive, plays video games, and primarily just does what other teenagers do. He describes himself as one of the kids about whom people wonder, *How could he ever get into drugs and the drug culture?* His explanation is simple: “People wonder why good childhoods and good upbringings can lead to selling drugs; it’s because there’s so much demand for drugs and so much profit to be made.” Alex can easily attest to the remarkable luxury drug dealing can provide. By the middle of his senior year in high school Alex relates, “I drove a Nissan 300ZX twin turbo, rode a Kawasaki Ninja bike, had my own apartment with thousands of dollars in the bank, and had women all over me. That’s the rockstar life right there,” he says with a laugh. At one point, before he moved out of his parent’s house due to their disapproval of his lifestyle, he had over \$11,000 stashed away in his closet. He worked a day job

to supplement the drug income which also helped to provide an excuse to his parents for the vast amounts of money he had.

This level of success was not instantaneous—an exhausting amount of work went into climbing his way up the drug dealing ladder. His business started with a small investment of \$20 in hallucinogenic mushrooms that he purchased with money from his allowance. His inspiration was equally innocent and curious: “I started to think, *Why should I have to spend all this money on having a good time? I could just as easily sell it, make money, and have a good time for free,*” he relates. “And then you get caught up in the business and it quickly becomes a way of life.”

Accordingly, the logistics of drug dealing and the dynamics within the trade are far simpler than one might imagine. Alex was first introduced to the drug trade by an 18-year-old family friend, Jesse, whom Alex would hang out with in downtown Sebastopol. Jesse hustled small amounts of marijuana (15 to 25 dollars worth) to any potential buyers on the street. With this model in mind, Alex began to take an interest in the trade, using Jesse as a sort of mentor. Jesse proved to be an important guide for Alex’s safety in the drug world—an important “what *not* to do” example of drug dealing. Soon enough, Jesse began to dabble in cocaine and more dangerous drugs which led to his eventual arrest. Desperately seeking money, Jesse offered to sell Alex his drug supplier’s cell phone number for \$50; this was Alex’s big chance and he eagerly accepted the offer.

With his own drug experiences, what Jesse had “taught” him, and the dealer’s cellphone number, Alex could tell that there was no better time than now. He was ready to do business: he made the call, picked up a half ounce of mushrooms for \$20, sold the half ounce for \$40—doubling his profits—then reinvested in another \$40 worth of mushrooms which he then turned around and sold for \$80, doubling his profits once again and continuing the exponential cycle. “The bigger you buy the more you make,” Alex says. “Eventually you get to the point where you are buying a pound of mushrooms for \$800 and then selling that for a profit of \$2000.” The dealing continued to escalate as Alex found more and more ways to increase his earnings: “I started out just selling mushrooms,” Alex says. “But then I started to sell marijuana because there is money there too and it’s just an easy drug to get your hands on and deal with.”

As with any job or profession, working your way up through the ranks—from small dealer to large amount distributor (this is the middle man, essentially the salesmen who sells to the dealer)—takes time and energy. A true professional in any field must build relationships that develop new markets and, in turn, increase one's profits. "When you first start out you pretty much take every deal," Alex says. "And then once you've created a name for yourself you can pick and choose your markets." By many standards, the drug trade is a rather easy and sensible profession; however, one of the main problems for the dealer is the lack of law enforcement. An obvious trade-off to selling illegal goods is that the police force can never protect against theft or crime. By eliminating the rule enforcement agencies of modern society (the police force, laws, etc.), the business world of drug dealing is governed by a controlled anarchy. Alex can relate many tricks that were used to rip him off when he first started dealing, before he had the reputation and connections that he has now: "When I was younger I never worried about the cops busting me or being arrested, I worried about having my supplies stolen," Alex says. "It is inevitable in the beginning that people will take advantage of you and the anarchy that governs our trade—sometimes you hand them the drugs and they take off running. Other times they give you a bunch of one dollar bills wrapped with a twenty and there's just nothing you can do." But now, his position as a distributor wards off potential thieves because he can cut off any smaller dealers who attempt to screw him over.

The dealing of illegal drugs resembles the modern business world in so many ways it is difficult to comprehend how one can argue that the federal government's "War on Drugs" will ever be successful or that mostly harmless drugs like marijuana and arguably hallucinogenic mushrooms can remain illegal. An important hierarchy of authority exists throughout the drug dealing culture. At the head of the pyramid are the growers, the factories of the industry, supplying drugs to people like Alex who then redistribute large quantities to smaller dealers who sell to the actual consumer. The structure of the system is based upon supply and demand; as Alex explains, "I get orders from a bunch of different dealers who tell me what they want. I then put everyone's orders together and drive up to Mendocino County (an area famous for its marijuana

trade—some estimate it accounts for 40% of the county’s entire economy). The last time I went up there I bought 5 pounds of weed at about \$2,800 a pound, which is about \$14,000 worth of marijuana. Now that is a good deal, considering the amount and price. When you drive it back to where the demand is, you can sell each pound for \$3,500—that’s \$700 profit immediately. That’s just selling to the *dealers*, who then make another profit off of the drugs,” Alex says.

And this pattern continues: whether it’s the supplier selling to Alex, Alex turning around and selling to the street level dealers, or the consumers who eventually purchase and use the drugs—each part of the chain gets a piece of the action. The actual methodology of the business model is simple in structure yet highly refined. The entire trade is marked by its stability; the demand for drugs rarely fluctuates as a business model might predict and it’s this property that lends the profession such consistency. Surprisingly so, one might think, because of the turbulence and danger that is usually associated with drugs. Much as in the early twenties when factory workers lined up desperate for any job, the drug industry is continually supplied with a labor force drawn to the trade’s profitability while simultaneously guaranteeing a constant level of commerce.

Ironically, the illegality of narcotics is the single most defining factor of price. Without this property, the underground marijuana industry (for example) would likely collapse under its own weight. The federal government’s “War on Drugs” does not actually drive down the market, but rather creates a higher risk margin for sellers, which in turn drives up prices, and hence one sees an increase in profitability. As the risk gets higher and higher, and as the profit margin is driven further and further up, the growers (with their larger income) become increasingly sophisticated. Some marijuana plantations now have hidden runways for plane shipments and many others now utilize armed guards.

The illegal drug industry presents Americans with a political and moral dilemma that has no simple solution. At the most basic level, the argument has become a clash between complete legalization and complete criminalization. Unfortunately, political close-mindedness to potential progress (for example: marijuana legalization combined with government taxation, increased

drug education in schools, and needle exchange programs) appears ready to polarize the drug debate for many years to come. It is clear, however, as Alex puts it, “People aren’t paying for what you’re giving them, they pay you for the service, the risk.” This risk is due to a powerful and dangerous political system that encourages circular logic and questionable motives.

Many politicians would be quick to condemn Alex as a criminal, a misfit, someone who is bad for society and a great evil. They argue that he is perpetuating the popularity of drugs in our society, that he must recognize what he is doing is downright wrong. However, there seems to be little evidence that drug dealers like Alex are responsible for drugs’ popularity—as I have pointed out above, Alex has used and sold the drugs for long enough to realize their danger and their power, both within the individual and within society as a whole. The appeal of drugs, apparently, is an attribute of modern society’s explicit and implicit endorsement of drugs (both legal and illegal). The typical consumer is bombarded daily with ads for prescription drugs, alcohol, and tobacco. Additionally, illegal drugs are routinely endorsed by America’s influential pop culture figures, resulting in a drug culture that has spread throughout society, from adolescents to senior citizens. Alex has sold to almost anyone you can imagine, from men in their late fifties to kids who have just become teenagers. The dealers he buys from can range in age from 19 to 60, from old hippies to entrepreneurial young adults who are looking to make serious money in a game that is conceivably as safe—economically—as playing the stock market or investing in real estate.

The difference is that this game requires no public schooling, no prestigious bachelor degree or expensive training. Alex, for example, graduated from high school and has no plans to return to school in the future. This is all part of what makes the game so attractive. It requires little more than the self-control to avoid getting caught up in the drugs yourself, with the successful dealers reaping considerable rewards. Letting the drugs get in the way of making a profit, however, is one of the easiest and potentially costliest mistakes a drug dealer can make. “One of the reasons why I was so successful is that I kept the drugs in check,” Alex says. “I was always calculating how much I could take for myself and how much

I needed to sell in order to keep going.” It is this cool efficiency that has allowed Alex and many others to excel in the drug world.

Alex’s speedy ascent up the drug ladder has even allowed him to begin selling to the increasing numbers of cannabis clubs in California, further emphasizing the paradoxical nature of his “profession”: He is illegally selling marijuana to clubs that then legally distribute the same weed to patients with a doctor’s prescription. The hypocrisy of this when compared to the federal government’s “War on Drugs” and the politics of our country is astounding. For the sake of time and space I will not delve any deeper into this issue except to put it into perspective. As Alex puts it, “The clubs are getting the exact same marijuana that the stoners are smoking, while helping to support the same cannabis industry that the stoner supports. Who are we to say that one piece of the same puzzle is both legal and illegal? It’s just crazy.”

What all of this serves to illustrate is that Alex plays an important role in the hypocritical view of drugs in our society. Our belief that we can eliminate drugs by making them illegal is as laughable as believing that people like Alex don’t exist. The roots of the drug culture have bored themselves into the deepest foundations of our society. The drug dealer merely serves an invisible empire of human desire, for as long as our society is structured as it is, the popularity of legal drugs such as alcohol and Prozac will continue to supplement and reinforce the desire for illegal ones. As Alex sees it, “You never really think twice about it, whether it’s morally right or wrong—it just is. The longer I do it, the more routine it gets until it becomes just another job.” Alex has no plans to quit his job and, more importantly, why would he? As long as the money and demand remains, there is really little reason to stop—it’s just another job. Accordingly, if one were to meet Alex on the street and humbly ask him what he does for a living, comfortably and calmly the response would come: “I feed a relentless human desire for the perfect escape—I deal drugs.”