

3 strikes AND, you're OUT

Three strikes laws — what you need to know

1 More states have some form of three strikes law than don't. 28 states have implemented this in some form.

2 Three drug offenses result in life without parole.

3 The name comes from baseball. If a batter gets three strikes, they're out, same as the law.

Aaron Malin, alumnus and former student body president, works to reform Missouri's three-strike drug law through an advertising campaign

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As an undergraduate, Aaron Malin, alumnus and former Truman State student body president, saw a news report about an organization called Show-Me Cannabis during 2012. Intrigued and motivated, he decided to reach out to the executive director at the time, and landed a volunteer position with them, becoming the northeast Missouri field director by the end of the year.

He said he developed a makeshift headquarters in his apartment and recruited other students to help him drive to various towns in northeast Missouri to gather petition signatures.

"In 2012, we spent the year going town to town and hosting several dozen town hall meetings in every city we could find in every corner of the state," Malin said.

Although the initiative didn't draw enough signatures to be placed on the ballot during 2012, Show-Me Cannabis is trying again for the 2016 election, hence the resurgence of the ad campaign and the national media attention this cause is drawing.

Malin currently is working on raising awareness through petition signatures for the 2016 election as director of research with the Show-Me Cannabis organization as well as directing an advertising campaign aimed at raising public awareness about the issue.

Malin said marijuana laws are in dire need of reform, and have been lumped with the consequences and penalties of possession of other drugs such as crack and heroin under Missouri's three-strike drug law.

Behind bars but catching the nation's eye is Missouri prisoner Jeff Mizanskey. Mizanskey is serving life without parole under Missouri's three-strike drug law, along with many other drug offenders. What makes his case different, however, is all three of his offense were non-violent marijuana offenses that didn't involve children.

Cases similar to Mizanskey's are remarkably uncommon, Malin said.

In an interview in the July 21 Riverfront Times, Mizanskey explained his situation from his perspective behind bars.

"I've done every program I can," Mizanskey said. "Don't I ever get a chance? What kind of people do they want out there? I'm being told that if you smoke a joint, they're going to throw you away forever."

Malin said Mizanskey was a low-level marijuana dealer. He received one strike for selling an ounce to a relative, one for possessing another ounce with intent to distribute, and his final strike was driving a friend to pick up a brick of marijuana. Missouri drug law allows for three strikes, landing him in prison for life without parole, Malin said.

"Most people who are three strike offenders are either big time heroin or crack dealers, but most often there are weapon charges involved," Malin said. "It's

very rare to have somebody with three strikes that are all only for marijuana, involve no children and don't involve weapons of any kind."

Mizanskey is the only Missouri prisoner serving life without parole for non-violent marijuana offenses. Mizanskey and his family knew the exceptional circumstances of his case and reached out to Show-Me Cannabis, an organization dedicated to the full legalization of marijuana in Missouri.

The distinction between violent and non-violent offenders is a significant one to the Show-Me Cannabis organization. Because he was a non-violent offender, Mizanskey's case caught the attention of Show-Me Cannabis.

Malin took a special interest in Mizanskey's case, and along with Show-Me Cannabis, the Free Jeff ad campaign was born.

A billboard depicting a prison uniform-clad Mizanskey along with the words "Life without parole for cannabis? It's time we fix our unjust marijuana laws" can



Submitted photo

The Free Jeff Mizanskey Campaign has put this billboard up along Interstate 70 to raise public awareness of unjust marijuana laws. They hope to free Mizanskey from his sentence of life without parole.

be seen along Interstate 70. Malin said they soon hope to have billboards scattered all throughout Missouri. They also hope to use the money they raise for radio, television and print ads.

"We're moving public opinion one person at a time, doing radio ads and putting up a number of different billboards across the state, featuring Jeff Mizanskey," Malin said.

Googling the Free Jeff Mizanskey Campaign yields a whole host of results ranging from the Riverfront Times to Reddit. His YouTube video, "Here I Am," which describes the details of his case, already has about 75,000 views.

According to the July 21 Riverfront Times article, the Free Jeff campaign will attempt to drum up even more media attention by raising \$21,000 for the 21 years Mizanskey already has spent behind bars. Since its beginning, the Free Jeff campaign has raised \$10,000, just shy of half their goal.

This media campaign aligns nicely with Show-Me Cannabis' goal of getting a ballot initiative to reform marijuana laws on the 2016 ballot.

A large part of Show-Me Cannabis' agenda is to reform existing marijuana laws so cases such as Mizanskey's get dropped and cease to exist during the future.

Malin said if Mizanskey is freed, he wants to help reform marijuana laws throughout Missouri.

Along with Mizanskey's brother Mike and son Chris, Malin spearheads the Free Jeff campaign. The campaign works with the goals of the Show-Me Cannabis organization, ultimately seeking the full legalization of marijuana throughout the state.

However, Malin said there was a symbiotic relationship between the two.

"Mizanskey very much looks forward to reforming the laws of Missouri and working to get other people like him out of prison. [He is] very interested in moving the cause of legalization forward, as is his family. At the same time, Show-Me Cannabis is very interested in working to get Jeff out of prison. So there's a lot of mutual working done — there's a lot of overlap."

Ultimately, Show-Me Cannabis looks for regulation of marijuana in a similar manner as alcohol. Malin said the ballot initiative they hope to pass in the 2016 election contains a clause that would release past offenders such as Mizanskey, whose offenses consist only of non-violent marijuana offenses involving no children.

Show-Me Cannabis tried to get the same ballot initiative on the 2012 ballot, but they only obtained 70,000 signatures, barely more than half of what they needed.

During his years at Truman, Malin got involved with Show-Me Cannabis after seeing a news report on it, and contacted the organization seeing how he could help.

He said he developed a makeshift headquarters in his apartment and recruited other students to help him drive to various towns in northeast Missouri to gather petition signatures.

While Show-Me Cannabis lobbies for full legalization and regulation of marijuana, Malin personally takes it a step farther and said he sees drug addiction and substance abuse as matters of public health rather than criminal justice. His end goal is to have drugs and addiction as a whole be removed from the jurisdiction of the justice system and be treated as a matter of health and safety.

"It does no good to lock drug addicts in a cage with no access to rehabilitation or treatment," Malin said.

He commented on the price tag associated with a criminal justice approach to drug reform. Locking up drug addicts simply perpetuates the problem. He views the war on drugs in Missouri as brutal, stating it is a humanitarian crisis.

"On a broader level, people who suffer from drug addiction do not benefit from the justice system's involvement in their lives," Malin said.