

# Edward L. Weidenfeld, ex-Reagan attorney who soared in cannabis industry, dies at 79

Image without a caption

By Michael S. Rosenwald

January 9, 2023 at 8:41 p.m. EST



Edward L. Weidenfeld, a Republican lawyer and general counsel to Ronald Reagan's 1980 presidential campaign who later became a cannabis entrepreneur and a critic of the war on drugs, including first lady Nancy Reagan's "Just Say No" campaign, died Dec. 28 at his home in Washington. He was 79.

The cause was complications of Parkinson's disease, his son Nick Weidenfeld said.

Mr. Weidenfeld, who worked in various capacities for six presidents and also had a successful career as an estate lawyer, became interested in cannabis following his diagnosis with Parkinson's in 2002, after which he began researching treatments that might slow the disease and provide relief.

Though physicians are still debating cannabis's effectiveness as a treatment for Parkinson's and other diseases, Mr. Weidenfeld said he found relief with the drug. In 2015, he helped launch Phyto Management, which sells medical-grade cannabis and edibles in Washington under the name District Cannabis.

Mr. Weidenfeld's second career in the cannabis business made him a cultural oddity in two worlds: high-society Washington, where he and his wife, Sheila Rabb Weidenfeld, the former press secretary for first lady Betty Ford, were fixtures for decades; and the rush-for-gold medical marijuana industry populated by young people who wouldn't have voted for Reagan had they been alive.

But Mr. Weidenfeld won over both worlds.

As his cocktail party friends grew older and were looking for alternative medical treatments, Mr. Weidenfeld became surprised by "the number of old political associates who've asked me if I could hook them up," he told the Daily Beast in 2018. Meanwhile, the cannabis world admired him for criticizing harsh drug laws and conservatives who blocked medical marijuana use.

In podcast appearances and interviews with industry publications, Mr. Weidenfeld said the "Just Say No" campaign and the broader, almost "nuclear battle" on drugs were mistakes, particularly with marijuana. "It demonized a substance which has tremendous therapeutic potential," he told the Cannabis Business Times in 2020, and "was used as a means of social control over people of color, immigrants."

While working as an attorney for the Reagan campaign and later advising his administration, Mr. Weidenfeld said he was opposed to the harsh policies but kept his opinion to himself. His views were not all that surprising given his upbringing, he said.



Edward Lee Weidenfeld was born July 15, 1943, in Akron, Ohio. His parents were small business owners who variously sold jewelry, appliances and other household goods. He was a good student enchanted by the English language; up until his death, he could recite T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" from memory.

In 1961, Mr. Weidenfeld enrolled at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, where he majored in political science. He was active in civil rights protests — he later traveled to Alabama to participate in the 1965 Selma to Montgomery march — as well as in other extracurricular activities favored by students.

Mr. Weidenfeld told the "Lit & Lucid Cannabis Podcast" in 2020 that "you could get beer in the student union and weed, not as a regular campus varietal, but if you set out to find some, you probably would" — which might help explain how he acquired the views that he kept from his Reagan colleagues.

"It was not an anti-weed sentiment that changed," he told the podcast, "but it was a respect for law that limited my personal exposure — and that's probably enough said on that subject."

Mr. Weidenfeld graduated in 1965 and attended law school at Columbia University in New York, where he met Sheila Rabb, the daughter of Maxwell M. Rabb, who served as White House Cabinet secretary for President Dwight D. Eisenhower and was Reagan's ambassador to Italy. They married in 1968, the same year he received his law degree.

After working as a TV producer, Mr. Weidenfeld's wife was hired in 1974 as Betty Ford's press secretary. Her connections in the Republican Party helped Mr. Weidenfeld's ascendance in politics, beginning in 1972 when he served as counsel and staff director for the House Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs. Eight years later, he became general counsel to Reagan's campaign.

Mr. Weidenfeld, like many Washington insiders, bounced in and out of government throughout his career. He was working as an estate lawyer when he was diagnosed with Parkinson's. Cannabis, he said, relieved his symptoms, especially the anxiety he felt over the disease's debilitating progression.

"When you've got a degenerative disease," he told the Daily Beast, "and there's something that makes you laugh and takes your mind off the disease, that's what is medically beneficial."

Mr. Weidenfeld's self-medicating turned into a business by happenstance. In 2010, at his son Nick's 30th birthday party, he met Andras Kirschner, who had a degree in sustainable agriculture from the University of Maine and cultivated medical-grade cannabis at a warehouse in California.

Kirschner wanted to start a medical marijuana company in the D.C. area. Mr. Weidenfeld, now looking to wind down his private law practice, was an ideal partner, with decades of experience navigating the corridors of government.

After co-founding what became District Cannabis, Mr. Weidenfeld and Kirschner expanded into Maryland.

Kirschner said Mr. Weidenfeld was active in every aspect of the business, from growing to marketing: "He was like an elder statesman when he walked in the room."

In addition to his wife, of Washington, Mr. Weidenfeld is survived by his son Nick and another son Daniel, both of Los Angeles; a sister; and three grandchildren.

Both of Mr. Weidenfeld's sons became TV producers. Nick was formerly president of programming for Vice TV, which produced a cooking-with-cannabis show called "Bong Appetit."

In 2017, Mr. Weidenfeld and his family appeared on an episode featuring a Shabbat dinner prepared by cookbook author Joan Nathan — matzoh ball soup, challah and roasted chicken all infused with various forms of cannabis.

Mr. Weidenfeld, who jokingly introduced himself as a "drug dealer," smoked some after dessert, blowing it into the air.

"Dad, how you doing back there?" one of his sons said.

Mr. Weidenfeld responded, "Where?"

*Correction: An earlier version of this story incorrectly reported the day Mr. Weidenfeld died. This article has been updated.*