

# Pot is having a moment in New York

If you have any doubts, witness the swelling number of trendy politicians



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**W**itness the mad dash to the finish line as New York politicians race to show how hip they are regarding marijuana.

It's part of a national trend. Some states are moving to full legalization, though recreational use is illegal under federal law. Opinion surveys such as those by the Pew Research Center find that a majority of Americans favor legalization.

So maybe it's not surprising that Sen. Chuck Schumer came out in favor of decriminalization in April. Gubernatorial candi-

date Cynthia Nixon is boosting bud, maybe her most fervent issue. Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo once considered the funny stuff to be a "gateway drug," but he has pushed for medical marijuana and is touting a study on legalization in the region.

In New York City, marijuana policy changes are underway. The Brooklyn and Manhattan district attorneys are in the midst of decreasing low-level marijuana prosecutions.

And though Mayor Bill de Blasio has told reporters he's "not there yet" on legalization, the esteemed progressive won't be fully left behind. At a speech at the Center for American Progress' 2018 Ideas Conference in Washington, he vowed that the NYPD would

"overhaul and reform" its marijuana enforcement policies in 30 days. His voice breathy with anticipation, he said of this and other progressive issues that, "I feel like we're seeing something we never saw before."

That might be a little bit of hot air, but it's more marijuana motion than the city has seen since 2014, when de Blasio moved toward summonses and said that low-level marijuana arrests would largely be made when people smoked in public. Arrests dropped, but racial disparities continued among those arrested, despite mostly equivalent use and similar levels of 311 complaints, as reported recently by The New York Times and the New York City Council, among others.

Why did marijuana return to policy-makers' plates again? Add the disparity in arrests to leftist energy coming out of

the 2016 election, a gubernatorial primary and national marijuana acceptance — to the point when NYPD Commissioner James O'Neill said in a statement last week, "The NYPD has no interest in arresting New Yorkers for marijuana offenses when those arrests have no impact on public safety."

All this might get you wondering whether in a few years, we'll look back and see this period as the tail end of an era. At that future date, it may seem crazy that police arrested people for personal use of what will then be regarded as a normal social lubricant. If that's true, then every person arrested for minor pot use now is among the last casualties of a war in which the armistice has essentially been signed.

Who are those people? There were 1,713 arrests in Nassau County, 1,597 arrests in

Suffolk County, and 17,880 arrests in New York City last year for which the top charge was a low-level marijuana misdemeanor, according to the state Division of Criminal Justice Services. Often, that means puffing on a joint outside. Police on Long Island and in New York City frequently issue desk appearance tickets, a form of arrest, for the misdemeanor, but traditional arrests are still made.

New York City data show marijuana arrests and violations clustered around black and Hispanic neighborhoods. Those are areas that de Blasio did not visit Tuesday to announce his forthcoming plan.

While the political winds shift, those neighborhoods keep waiting.

*Mark Chiusano is a member of Newsday's editorial board.*

## EXPRESSWAY

# Where we learned to be strong women

BY BARBARA HETZER WAGNER

**I**t has been 39 years since I graduated from high school, but several former classmates and I recently went back to say goodbye to the building itself.

Dominican Commercial, an all-girls Catholic school in Jamaica, Queens, closed in 1998 after 62 years because of declining enrollment. The building had since been leased to various outreach programs and remained largely intact. But now the school building, two convents and a parking lot have been sold by the Dominican Sisters of Amityville.

Sunday, April 22, brought an opportunity to walk through those halls one last time and meet up with old friends — and old memories. Gone were the chunky, white "marshmallow" shoes and textured hose we had worn to spice up our dull brown uniform skirts. Instead, most of my former classmates — who grew up to be police officers, teachers, secretaries, journalists, and every other profession — wore comfort shoes and mom jeans. The bathrooms were as cramped as I remember: Back in



**Dominican Commercial High School, an all-girls Catholic school in Jamaica, closed in 1998. The building is getting a new owner.**

the day, a dozen of us would somehow crowd inside, experimenting with eyeliner, swapping stories about boyfriends and sharing a cigarette between classes. (The latter, of course, was forbidden.)

The rows of desks laden with typewriters were gone. "Typewriting 1," still engraved in black letters on a wooden classroom door, had been required for most of us. The salmon-colored lockers that once lined the hallways were

gone, but by chance, I happened upon a remaining few in an alcove. They looked so small. Since my locker was all the way up on the third floor, I shared my friend Grace Ferragamo's locker every day for four years. How did we squeeze all of our stuff in there? Was it the close quarters that made us close friends?

Entering the cafeteria, I felt as if I had driven a DeLorean back in time. As I filed through the old hot-food line, I could

smell the French fries and knishes that made up my daily diet. I could hear one of the nuns welcoming us to our daily prayer. (Oh, wait — that was a retired nun actually addressing that day's attendees!)

When the hundreds of accomplished women present began to belt out our school song, "Dominican alma mater, pride of our high school days . . .," I had a revelation:

Long before anyone talked about finally shattering the glass ceiling by electing a female president, long before the #MeToo movement showed women how to stand up to the most powerful men in business, a coterie of warm and intelligent Dominican sisters taught several generations of New York girls what it meant to be a woman.

There was no mention ever of our expected or limited female roles. (At least, I never heard it.) Instead, we were charged to fulfill our potential as responsible and loving people. In this girls-only environment, we were free — to explore, to ponder, to question — without the typical teen angst about how we looked or

what the boys in the next row thought of us. The result? Our true selves were unleashed. For me, it was the first time in my young life that I started to think for myself. Yes, I became a feminist.

Virginia Woolf famously wrote that every woman deserves a room of her own. Well, we girls of the late 20th century certainly benefited from a school of our own. Who knew that a small high school best known for churning out highly skilled secretaries (and later also sending hundreds of others on to college and professions) was actually so cutting edge?

Thank you, dear Dominican.



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