

Stewart Richlin's Long Strange Trip to Become a Weed Lawyer

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Weed lawyer Stewart Richlin

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On any given night, past security and down a long corridor emanating a skunky aromatic haze, attorney Stewart Richlin can be found in the lounge of a cannabis speakeasy comedy club. He's laughing, shmoozing, and enjoying the \$20-all-you-can-vape/all-you-can-dab at this spot on L.A.'s east side.

The self-proclaimed "variety pack" professional these days dabbles in comedy, but he's tried his hand at teaching yoga, manufacturing toys, and most prominently, practicing weed law as an expert court witness and a litigator.

"I love cannabis people and I love cannabis itself," says Richlin. "[Cannabis] creates a nice culture that I hope continues as it goes more mainstream. So far the people who select themselves into the cannabis community are groovy people who have a nice aura around them."

Definitely "groovy," Richlin himself is no exception to his own description of "cannabis people" – the spiritually inclined, selectively vegan, secular Jew, Tibetan Buddhist, and Beverly Hills High School alum not only embodies L.A. pot culture, but he also channels the city's most classic eccentricities.

After studying at UCLA and Southwestern Law before becoming an attorney in 1986, Richlin quit his job in 1995 to become a yoga teacher. He founded Yoga on Melrose, dubbing himself Yogi Stew. "I learned how to meditate, which also ripened my mind a little bit as a brand new lawyer," he says. Without a break between kindergarten and law school, Richlin says he was beginning to feel burnt out after taking the bar exam. Though he practiced law for a few years, yoga offered the kind of break he needed, and even re-inspired his law practice later on. "I came back to law after doing that, feeling kind of refreshed," says Richlin. "Shortly after that, I discovered the needs of medical marijuana clients."

In 2002, Richlin reopened his own law practice, focusing on the then-brand new medical marijuana industry, helping growers and dispensary owners comply with state regulations. "I see people in the beginning of their journey when they want to know what the law is and have someone explain it to them and walk them through it," says Richlin, who makes comic book-like flowcharts for his clients that translate legalese into plain English.

"Medical marijuana law satisfied my interest in serving the underdog, and the underserved, the fringe or what I considered to be the up-and-coming," he says. Until the implementation of Assembly Bill 266, which requires growers, dispensaries, delivery services, manufacturers, and others in the medical marijuana industry to obtain state and city licenses while forcing some to shut down by 2018 when it takes effect, California's largely unregulated medical marijuana program gave Richlin an opportunity to apply what he learned from yoga to his law practice. "Part of what I learned doing yoga and meditation is how to deal with a certain amount of ambiguity and proceed forward," he says. "What you get from yoga is to trust your own experience. Instead of panicking about the obvious negative implications of [AB] 266, the mind of yoga would be more fluid and adapt to its benefits and frame it in the sense that it will probably be challenged in court and softened."



Dedicated to the civil rights of individual medical marijuana patients and the "little guy," Richlin aims to help those under-the-gun better understand AB 266: Mom and pop growers, as well as medical marijuana collectives at risk under the new law. "AB 266 offers a bunch of new opportunities for licensing, growing, distributing, and manufacturing. Since they have failed to control the cities, there's a patchwork of rules. Unless you get a license from your city, you'll never get a license from the state," says Richlin. In L.A. County alone exists the city of Los Angeles, 88 independent cities, and county land, so there are three different categories, but 90 different medical marijuana rules, he says. "That is really dumb and it has unintended consequences like pushing people to the black market in some communities."

"Having been in [medical marijuana law] for over 10 years, I know the legislative history and am court qualified as an expert," he adds. By utilizing an expert witness, a defense attorney can mount defense and get documents into evidence without having the defendant take the stand and waive his Fifth Amendment rights, says Richlin.

"What's important is that patients don't go to jail for taking care of themselves and their families," he says. "Part of what I do when I put on that superhero identity is bring logic to the courtroom and a counterbalance to the types of conclusions that the prosecuting attorney and his witness – usually a police officer – will try to put in front of a jury or judge. They will frequently misstate the law."

If the opportunity presents itself, Richlin will also try to make the jury laugh – a little comedy goes a long way in the courtroom, bringing the court and jury down to basic human interaction. It's part of Richlin's greater move back into comedy as he prepares for the next stage of his career, which involves writing a TV pilot about opening up a yoga studio. "Maybe this comedy thing will be the next chapter for me," Richlin says. "If I'm lucky."