

# TL pot club ready to face Planning panel

BY TOM CARTER

**T**HE Mason Street Dispensary, a former 8-by-8-foot storage closet that you need to know about to find, will be the Tenderloin's first medical cannabis club to go before the Planning Commission for approval on April 12 and to face the city's tough new regulations.

The dispensary is a closed cubicle with no signage at the rear of Cafe.Com, an Internet coffee house and juice bar. Nothing on the business' 124 Mason St. façade — except for the temporary Planning notice — indicates that medical marijuana is in the back where it's dispensed out of 37 clear plastic canisters to patients on the other side of a one-way glass mirror. The modus operandi is in keeping with the trend toward low profile, a plus before the commission.

Owner Tariq Alazraie, a businessman in the neighborhood since 1996, says the pharmacy pulls yeoman's duty in the neighborhood by dispensing to 800 licensed patients suffering from physical and mental pain: 80% come from nearby SROs.

All the city's 27 existing clubs must go under commission scrutiny by June 30 because of legislation passed in 2005 to tighten their operating requirements and to halt club proliferation. Only three dispensaries have been approved. The last was The Green Door at 843 Howard St. in January.

Two dispensaries are in the TL. The Sanctuary at 669 O'Farrell St. recently removed its 18- by 30- inch black and red flag hanging in front that showed a marijuana leaf growing out of a caduceus. Now it has a 14-inch framed statement with its purpose and hours on the front wrought-iron door. The Divinity Tree Wellness Co Op at 958 Geary St. has a handsome 5-foot-long green canvas awning announcing its name on the side and showing a 5-inch marijuana leaf in front.

On the fringes, behind Divinity Tree at 1077 Post St., a 7-foot-long, 2-foot-wide sign says simply "Grass Roots," another pharmacy. A block away, the CMC pharmacy at 1222 Sutter St. has a blank 25-foot purple awning and nothing to identify it as a pot club on the width of the screen spanning its façade.

Alazraie is confident that his dispensary's unblemished record, its virtual anonymity and his history of charitable contributions to service nonprofits such as Glide, St. Anthony Foundation, Community Housing Partnership and the Haight

Ashbury Free Clinics will sway the commission. He has been active in neighborhood improvement groups for 12 years, co-chaired the Lower Eddy/Leavenworth Task Force for three years, and serves on The Extra's Editorial Advisory Committee.

"I've got eight letters of support," he said in an interview over jackhammer noise from the sidewalk in front. "And there's been no trouble here at all, not one complaint. It's peaceful. Look around."

The café with its off-white tile floor, dark maroon walls and high ceilings has a couch, table and two easy chairs in the front, and a dozen computers against the walls going back to the service counter. Three men drank coffee in the lounge area where the sun streamed in and two others were at computers. A movie played on a large television screen above the cubicle's mirror.

The pharmacy used to be in the basement where smoking was allowed. But it was moved upstairs into the storage closet last year and smoking on the premises is not allowed, a takeout-only condition some commissioners in January thought should prevail for all clubs.

At the Tenderloin Police Community Forum on March 27, Alazraie told of his pending appearance at the commission, asked for support and answered questions. There were few. No, he didn't grow marijuana, something that invites a federal bust. It's a nonprofit operation, as all clubs are, he said, and his system protects people's privacy.

An e-mail poll conducted later in the month by the Alliance for a Better District 6 posed this question: "Do you feel that a medical cannabis dispensa-



PHOTO BY LENNY LIMJOCO

**Owner Tariq Alazraie** on his day off with daughters Sonia, 4, and Anisa, 6, in front of Cafe.com's medical marijuana dispensary door.

ry is needed on Mason near Eddy Street?" Of the Alliance's 200 members, 55 voted, 48 were for and 7 against.

Alazraie, who has two other businesses, was a jet fighter pilot in the Jordanian air force 20 years ago. He came to this country in August 1987. He is married and has three daughters.

"Safety is the main issue," he said, "that people are not threatened and robbed. If they didn't have dispensaries, patients would have to buy off the street and deal with shady people. So it's extremely important that we do it here, in San Francisco, and do it right. This is serious business for the well-being of people. This is my neighborhood and I care about it. It's personal with me."

Alazraie estimates the permit process he began last August will end up costing \$40,000.

The commission meets April 12 at 1:30 p.m. in Room 400. ■

## Glide building 81 units for families, 56 studios for ex-homeless

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the world" for low-income families, she said. Swinerton Inc. is the contractor.

Construction on the eight-story, \$26.5 million studios at 149 Mason is to start in November, be complete in mid-2009 and follow a green design. The 56 studios each will have a bathroom but no kitchen, and the second floor will have a landscaped deck. The formerly homeless tenants will have a raft of counseling, job training and referral services. A commercial ground floor space is planned to house a cafe. There will be no car parking, but space for 27 bicycles in the basement.

The project is financed by state and city housing programs, private lenders, foundations, including Local Initiatives Support Corp., the Mayor's Office of Housing, San Francisco's Convention Facilities Department and the state's Debt Allocation Commission.

"Step by step we're realizing our vision of creating a healthy and vibrant neighborhood in the Tenderloin," said Williams. "More than just affordable homes, these new buildings will provide a safe community for our working families and our homeless neighbors."

GEDC's partner for the studios is TNDC.

"Where is Willie Brown?" Williams asked, looking around from the lectern before introducing Mayor Newsom. "I'm told he is on his way. He was never on time when he was mayor. He told me five years ago, 'Build on that prop-

erty.' Now I can't find him."

Brown had encouraged Williams to run with the Pavilion, which he called "the crown jewel of our ongoing efforts to transform the Tenderloin community." Part of the plan was to build 200 affordable housing units. Williams said completing the Pavilion was his ultimate dream, before he could consider retiring. He is 77. But the pavilion was scuttled 18 months ago when GEDC could not buy the remaining eight land parcels of the 12 it needed.

Newsom piped up, "It's okay," he said, grinning. "Since he's (Brown) not here I'll take the credit."

Brown never did show up.

The projects' principals walked down wooden steps to the 125 Mason digging site and, grabbing shovels, posed for pictures as the crowd hit the buffet tables.

Newsom took a moment to pose with Jamelia Fells, 22, Dalama Kelly, 18, and Michaela Ponce, 17. They were in coveralls and hard hats, having recently become adept at power tools, the jigsaw and cutting sheet metal. They are finishing a nine-month Glide training program on Treasure Island to become construction workers.

"It's giving young people a shot at a good life," said Steve Michell of NorCal Carpenters Local 22. He runs the 2-year-old program for 17- to 24-year-olds. Graduates also earn a GED high school diploma.

Swinerton will hire four to eight entry- and mid-level graduates.

Supplanting blighted parking lots with low-income housing is nonetheless keeping the Tenderloin way off its open space standard, one neighborhood group indicated the next day.

The city's Sustainability Plan and General Plan sets open space standards for every neighborhood, the Alliance for a Better District 6 said in an e-mail. The TL has 1.29 acres of open space, far short of the 7.8 acres per 1,000 residents that the city sets as a goal.

The e-mail encouraged readers to sign a petition that will call for a halt to development on TL's remaining vacant lots and will "support the conversion to open space." ■



PHOTO BY LENNY LIMJOCO

**Mayor Newsom** mingled among Glide trainees who hope to land construction jobs.