

Collections • Warehouse

Philadelphia lawyer charged as part-owner of warehouse where marijuana was allegedly cultivated

By **Nathan Gorenstein**, Inquirer Staff Writer

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The warehouse in Philadelphia's American Street industrial corridor looks like many other relics of the city's blue-collar past, but in 2008 and '09, it entered the modern world when it was turned into an indoor marijuana farm with 1,600 plants, authorities say.

From April through July 2009, 15 to 22 pounds of high-quality marijuana a month was harvested at the site and sold to drug users in the area, federal prosecutors say.

On Thursday, a Philadelphia lawyer who is part-owner of the property, Richard K. Creamer, was charged with conspiracy to manufacture and sell the marijuana. He pleaded not guilty Thursday at a hearing in federal court.

Creamer, 38, is accused of running the operation with another Philadelphia man, James M. Alberts, 37. Alberts, a contractor, spent months in 2008 fitting out the warehouse, near American and Dauphin Streets in North Philadelphia, Assistant U.S. Attorney Joseph T. Labrum III said.

"The evidence has shown they basically had 10 people that came in for the harvests" once a month, Labrum said. More frequently, "they would all work trimming the plants and hanging them upside down to dry," he said.

Alberts has pleaded guilty to drug charges and will be sentenced in the fall. Creamer was taken into custody Thursday morning. Calls to his law office went unanswered Thursday.

The city promoted the American Street corridor as an industrial park in the 1990s, and the old manufacturing area has been dotted with warehousing and commercial businesses.

In 2007, a company Creamer established, 2306 American L.L.C., bought the building for \$375,000. It has 17,700 square feet of usable space, according to city records. Federal agents say Creamer used part of the space as a private office.

Alberts installed heat, water, and lights in 2008, and by April 2009 the first plants were harvested, according to prosecutors. They said about 300 plants had reached maturity each month.

"We hear it was pretty high quality," Labrum said.

The retail price was \$5,000 to \$5,500 a pound, and part of the proceeds went to Creamer, Labrum said.


But before long, an informant tipped off the federal Drug Enforcement Agency. A stakeout ensued, and in June 2009, DEA agents reported seeing 20 to 30 large plastic bags removed from the warehouse and dropped in a Dumpster about a half-mile away. An agent retrieved one of the bags and "discovered numerous marijuana root balls inside," according to authorities.

At 4 a.m. the next day, DEA agents scooped up 12 of the bags and found 114 root balls.

During surveillance, the agents saw Alberts come and go in a Porsche Cayenne SUV. At least once they saw a white Mercedes-Benz pull up and the driver leave the warehouse with a large package in the trunk.

Agents kept watch until July 16, when the warehouse was raided and Alberts and nine others were arrested.

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Labrum said Alberts had previously set up three smaller marijuana operations in houses he renovated elsewhere in North Philadelphia.

State records and various websites also list Creamer as owner or chief executive of other businesses, including a company that manages a New York City disc jockey.

He and Alberts also owned a property on the 400 block of Fairmount Avenue, where Creamer kept his law office, according to his website.

Creamer's attorney, A. Charles Peruto Jr., could not be immediately contacted.

Contact staff writer Nathan Gorenstein at 215-854-2797 or ngorenstein@phillynews.com.

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