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Jazz Age Normandie Hotel may roar again as 'pot-tel'

Marijuana advocates are renovating the aging Koreatown building, starting with Room 420.

By John Hoeffel, Los Angeles Times

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The Hotel Normandie, a stoic brick building weighing down a corner of Normandie Avenue and 6th Street, opened in the Roaring '20s as an elegant residence, promising in tasteful advertisements to "leave nothing to be desired by the most experienced and exacting."

Tuesday night, the hotel will host another grand opening, for a very different, experienced and exacting clientele: pot smokers.

The aging Koreatown edifice has been rechristened Dennis Peron's Normandie Hotel, and the late-night event was timed for April 20, the annual day of celebration for cannabis worshippers worldwide.

Peron, a hero to the marijuana movement, started the first dispensary in San Francisco and led the state's medical marijuana initiative. Now, he and a team of weed-loving friends hope to turn the 106-room Normandie into America's first pot-friendly hotel.

"It's really a logical step, a logical step. It's a big city. And they needed me down here. And I needed a change," said Peron, who believes marijuana is a deeper part of the culture in Los Angeles than in San Francisco. "It's the people. It's the numbers. It's the pop culture. It's skaters."

John Evangelista, a real estate investor who has known Peron since his San Francisco hippie days, bought the hotel in January and invited Peron to create a "pot-tel." "He has a certain following, a certain know-how, a certain energy and kind of vision," Evangelista said.

But like many marijuana business ventures, much about this one remains murky.

Evangelista is in a dispute with the former owner, who alleges in a lawsuit that he only intended to sell a half-interest in the hotel. Evangelista said because of the disagreement, the hotel is now about \$200,000 behind in its loan payments and he could lose it to the lenders.

"It'll be around until 4/20," he promised, referring to Tuesday night's party and to 420, which is slang for smoking marijuana.

It's also unclear where the money would come from for the projected \$500,000 overhaul. Peron and his friends plan to sell \$420, two-day packages and are open to help from investors. A few rooms have been renovated with the cost paid by donations, though no one will say from whom.

But these are mere details to Peron, whose Cannabis Buyers' Club sprouted from his imagination into the birthplace of the medical marijuana movement. Peron does have hospitality experience. He owns the Castro Castle, a San Francisco Victorian where he has lived for three decades. Painted to look like it is made of purple stone, it is a laidback bed-and-breakfast decorated with photos from Peron's storied past.

"Sociable is my business," Peron said, sitting in the Normandie's drab dining room, which had been cheered up a little with green helium-filled balloons and poster-sized photos of the hotel's early days. "You couldn't get any more sociable than marijuana. The hotel is just the extension of it."

Peron and Richard Eastman, a friend and dogged Los Angeles marijuana activist who is doing the marketing, have big dreams for the dowdy hotel and eagerly show off its potential charms. A favorite is the nonworking Erector-set neon sign on a rooftop that could someday support a deck where pot smoke would mingle with the view of the Hollywood sign.

They make an unusual duo — Eastman loquacious, Peron low-key. Asked who might want to stay at the hotel, Eastman named a bunch of pot-friendly celebrities, while Peron said: "We think ordinary people," which might explain why Eastman does the marketing.

"We have a motto now," Eastman said. "Forget Amsterdam. Meet me at 6th and Normandie. You won't need a passport to come to the Normandie Hotel. You won't need a plane ticket to come to the Normandie Hotel. All roads lead to the Normandie. On the Metro, the bus, the taxis, we're centrally located in the middle of the center of the universe right here."

Eastman grandly bills the hotel as the United Nations of marijuana, and has been polishing some one-liners, which Peron gamely puts in his own words.

Eastman: "You won't need a towel at the bottom of the door. "

Peron: "Yeah, you don't have to put towels down there."

Eastman: "And there are some no-smoking hotels. We're definitely not one of them."

Peron: "We're definitely not. There are some no-smoking hotels. We're not no-smoking."

The Normandie began as a dignified residence hotel. It touted a \$1 turkey dinner prepared by Mrs. H.F. Bruner and was a luncheon spot for women's clubs. In 1938 and 1939, it was briefly home to British author Malcolm Lowry, who was reworking his masterpiece, "Under the Volcano." In 1957, rooms cost \$4, and in 1970, they were only \$7. In the 1980s, the hotel was a retirement center.

Most recently, with rooms advertised on banners at \$49.99, it catered to budget travelers, long-term tenants and Korean-speaking visitors. Its nightclub and restaurant, with their fanciful and

outdated decor, are abandoned. Its lobby houses an odd assemblage of furniture and vending machines. Its rooms are decorated in a palette of flesh tones. It is comfortable but worn.

Peron has promised rooms with a "hippie rustic" theme, but so far there is little evidence either of that or of the stoner kitsch that has become standard fare at Los Angeles dispensaries. Before the money from donations ran out recently, Peron and his crew had been yanking up carpet, refinishing oak floors and painting rooms in soothing earth tones. They started, of course, with Room 420.

Very little marijuana is evident. But Eastman says the hotel has had some pot-smoking visitors. And Peron and some friends have established an outpost on the fourth floor.

On a recent day, Caroline Lewis had a blunt wedged into a notch in an ashtray beside her bed. She said she smokes pot for back pain from the epidurals she had during four C-sections. She moved in about three months ago and loves the vibe. "Oh, God, it is so freaking terrific," she said. "It'll give medical patients a safe environment where they aren't hassled by the police."

She lives with Dennis Carpenter, who says he has been smoking marijuana to relieve stress. He works for Evangelista and was helping refurbish the rooms. "I was envisioning it to be like a green hotel," he said. "I was expecting it to be a lifelong project."