

HE'S ON A MISSION FROM GOD

HOW BELOVED CHARACTER ACTOR JIM BELUSHI FOUND A NEW CAREER AND A NEW PURPOSE.

WHEN JIM Belushi introduces himself, the first words come with a rush of recognition. Preparing for the mental torrent instigated by the familiarity of the voice would've been impossible. The sheer number of times one has heard it is staggering, and its in-person presence makes thinking about all those times inevitable. After following in his brother John's footsteps as a cast member on *SNL*, Belushi built an impressive résumé, the highlights of which necessarily twitch through one's memory at the sound of his voice: the sitcoms like the still-syndicated *According to Jim*, the cartoon voice-overs from *Hey Arnold!* to *Doc McStuffins* to *The Adventures of Jimmy Neutron: Boy Genius*, the dramatic parts in critical darlings like *Twin Peaks* and *The Ghost Writer*.

Being interviewed by *Newsweek*, though, there's one role in particular he wants to talk about, on the Amazon Original Series *Good Girls Revolt*, which dramatized the struggle for equality among female journalists in the late-1960s at the aptly named *News of the Week*. In a coincidence fit for the big—well, at least the small—screen, Belushi played the magazine's editor in chief: in other words, a fictional version of this correspondent's boss's boss's boss's boss. "[For the show,] they had old photographs of Reagan, LBJ and the pope and they put my body in," he remembers, laughing. "When the show got canceled I put them up in my own office and people would come over and



Jim Belushi and his team pose for a photo after loading a pickup truck with plants and flowers. The skies surrounding Belushi's farm are often host to mating Bald Eagles, which gives the stretch of Oregon the name Eagle Point.

TYLER MADDOX COURTESY BELUSHI FARMS



say, 'Oh my God, Jim, I didn't know you knew the pope!' This role, a man whose job it was to relay the news to millions, is an interesting one to begin our conversation with: to hear him talk about his new career, the goal is very much the same.

Despite the fact that Belushi is still very much a working actor, with a new film in the works and voice-over gigs to boot, it's not only show business that interests the 64-year-old Chicago native, it's his other job. More than 700 miles up the West Coast from Los Angeles, on the banks of Oregon's Rogue River, Belushi has undertaken a project that could ultimately reach more people than even a major studio film. About 12 years ago, visiting a friend with property on the river, Belushi had an epiphany that would change his career, his outlook and his entire life.

"My dear friend would invite us up there a couple of times a year, and it's just beautiful," Belushi says. "I jumped into the river, into this freezing-cold water, and when I came out again it was like I had woken up; I had to get a place out here."

After purchasing 13 acres on the river—an old picnic grounds previously owned by a local Elks Lodge—Belushi settled into his new property in what he considers to be one of the most beautiful parts of the country, getting to know the land and, more importantly for our story, the neighbors. "I got to know the neighbor really well, Becca, who was just a lovely person," Belushi continues. "And before she passed, she told me she wanted me to have her farm." Belushi bought the property, adjacent to his own, giving Becca's widower, Charlie, something of a life estate.

Now Belushi had a farm but nothing to grow. "Do I grow hay? Alfalfa? What?" he wondered. But with cannabis at this point recently legal in Oregon, he decided to give the new cash crop a try. The land in his region, after all, had already proven itself suitable for growing some of the best crops in the world. "Northern California and southern Oregon are right on the same parallel as Burgundy and Bordeaux: It's got 16 hours of sun in the summer, 292 days of sunshine, the water coming right down from the mountains," Belushi gushes about the soil that helped make

his decision for him. "[We can grow] the most organic, natural, beautiful cannabis, I think, in the country." Before long, a 48-plant medical garden marked the beginning of what would grow to be Belushi's Farm.

Befitting someone of his comedic pedigree—as well as the quality of the land on which it would be grown—the seed came from a source of historical note: 1970s counterculture hero Captain Jack. "Danny [Aykroyd] turned me onto him," Belushi explains. The legendary grower, who, it's worth noting, won't reveal whether he's the same character who appears in the eponymous Billy Joel song, is supposed to have gone to Afghanistan in the '70s. For two summers, he worked pulling cannabis seeds at the bottom of the Kush mountains, in an ancient Silk Road village known for its hashish. When he came home, it was with a big bag of seeds, which immediately became famous. "The reason Danny knows him is because he was the weed dealer for *SNL* in those early years, known as the 'Smell of *SNL*,'" Belushi says. Captain Jack has, according to Belushi, been growing those seeds to flower for more than 40 years.

Set up with the finest seeds and the finest climate, Belushi's medical garden soon blossomed into a much more expansive grow, pulling its owner along on a journey of education. "I've learned a lot of science about cannabis," Belushi says. Indeed, he can rattle off terpenes and their effects with the efficiency of an Anheuser-Busch brewmaster waxing poetic about the properties of the choice hops and barley in every beer.

"Oregon is a tough community. They take a lot of pride in what they do, especially when it comes to agriculture," he continues. "A lot of people are sticking their names on cannabis to try to make money, but I didn't want anybody to know." For the first few years of his farming enterprise, Belushi's name didn't even appear in the farm's name. The owner can most often be found wrist deep in dirt or examining the terpene makeup of crops. He recites the steps involved in the harvest with the care of a student expecting a pop quiz, but he's still in awe of everything cannabis can do.

His most important lessons were, however,



Belushi's Farm and two of its grow houses. The farm also boasts a totem pole and sweat lodge built for Belushi by members of the Takelma tribe, as Belushi says, "to honor the spirit of the Takelma people who lived there before me."

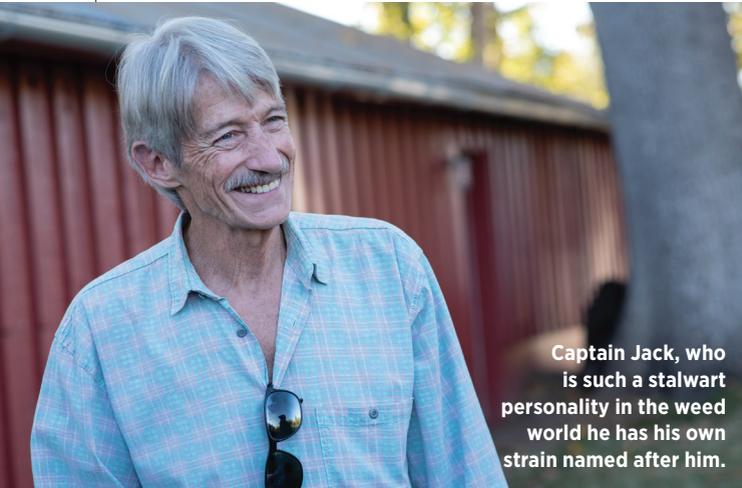
more esoteric than agricultural. "I've learned that [cannabis] heals people," he says bluntly. "The wellness of cannabis includes helping with Alzheimer's, seizures, headaches, anxiety, PTSD and pain. It enhances the sound of music, it enhances food.... It brings a sense of joy, euphoria and enlightenment. These are things we all deserve. I started growing cannabis as an agricultural item—something to do with my new land, but this plant has pulled me along to its spiritual and medical nature. It's grown into this search for healing and enlightenment."

"Everybody needs medicine, and I think this is the safest medicine," he says, effectively summing up the entire philosophy for his new business. And after talking to him for just a few minutes, it's easy to get a sense of why. Belushi's focus on learning everything he can about cannabis and passing that knowledge onto others is rooted in the personal pain of losing his brother, John. "If we knew in the 1970s what we know now about the medical benefits of cannabis, I think there would be a lot more people alive today, including my brother," Belushi says. "Dan Aykroyd always says, 'You

know, Jimmy, I think if Johnny were a pothead he'd still be alive.' So I'm being brought full circle."

Belushi puts a lot of stock in access, determined that anyone who needs an alternative to the opiates—and other hard drugs U.S. doctors are often too eager to prescribe—has one. "These poor NFL guys have suffered [and are at risk for] CTE and can't smoke a joint because if they test dirty they can't play—so they have to take the other medicine. And that's no good for you. We all know that." This, too, comes with the burden of asking "what if?" "My brother was a football player, all-conference middle linebacker with the school record for most tackles," Belushi says of the late John. "He had a lot of concussions. He got his bell rung all the time. When he went to college, he smoked his first joint and I think he finally found his medicine.... But the baby boomers grew up with the perception that [cannabis] was a 'drug.'" You can hear the scare quotes in his voice. "And so many of them ended up doing other drugs." John Belushi died of an overdose of cocaine and heroin on March 5, 1982, 37 years to the day before Jim's interview for this article.

TYLER MADDOX COURTESY BELUSHI FARMS



Captain Jack, who is such a stalwart personality in the weed world he has his own strain named after him.

Access, always access, is the key to preventing deaths like his brother's, according to Belushi. Which is why he's been working closely with the city of Portland, Oregon, on a pipe dream he hopes will help undo some of the damage opioids have wrought on the community. As he tells the story of seeing the same homeless woman shuffle down a Portland street a few nights in a row while having his nightly cigar, and after a few nights the woman stops, overcome, and starts screaming—emotion almost cracks his stalwart, voice-over actor's tone. It's people like this he hopes to aid by setting up points throughout Portland's Old Town, where people in need can learn about cannabis's possible medicinal uses as well as trade opiates for cannabis-based medicine. Logistics are tough—someone can't just walk into a dispensary and hand a budtender a felony's worth of Vicodin—but Belushi is determined, even if it means simply setting up in pop-up shops and giving weed away. "I just think that if people who need it started smoking it, the power of the healing will take them somewhere where they can maybe reach out to someone, maybe find some help—maybe just stop the screaming," Belushi says.

At dispensaries and on his travels throughout Oregon's cannabis scene, Belushi has built a collection of cannabis testimonials as impressive as his knowledge of terpenes and THC percentages. "There's a guy I talked to the other day who had almost every bone in his body broken in Iraq. The VA gave him 600 OxyContin per prescription.... Holy s---," he says. This can't be the first time he's shared the story, but disbelief at how irresponsibly

the deadly drug was treated is still thick in his tone. "This guy was doing that many opiates for four years and was finally able to get off them with cannabis edibles and oil."

Veterans in particular, so many of whom are prescribed opiates for injuries and so many of whom suffer from PTSD, are of particular concern for Belushi. "Another veteran I met visiting a dispensary came up to me and said, 'I was a medic in Iraq—I saw things that should never happen to a human body,'" Belushi says. "He [got back home to his] three kids and [his] wife and couldn't talk to them. He couldn't sleep." Cannabis, specifically Belushi's Black Diamond OG strain, was the only thing that allowed him to "settle down enough to talk to his family and to sleep."

"Magic. It's magic," Belushi says, punctuating his stories of healing with what might be the best summary of his view as presented to *Newsweek*. Belushi simply hopes to share that magic. It's an uphill struggle in a world that was taught for a century or more that cannabis was a dangerous drug. But with legalization, the climb is getting easier and easier. This year, Belushi plans to unveil a brand that will bring global recognition and an established fan base to his project of healing. John Belushi's widow Judy and Dan Aykroyd worked with Belushi to allow the farm to use the Blues Brothers in naming and labeling their strains. "This brand will capture everything there is in cannabis: the mission to heal the community, the sense of joy, the enhancement of music. We're really looking forward to releasing that later in 2019. It represents music, fun, a little bit of skulduggery and a mission from God."

In Belushi's eyes, that mission from God is spreading the healing power of cannabis to those who need it. In fact, when he describes what a new *Blues Brothers* movie might look like, he envisions Jake and Elwood visited by "the Penguin," the Mother Superior who raised them, and told the orphans in her charge need cannabis to heal their seizures. One imagines the band might light some of it up on the way back and incidentally cause a great deal of mayhem along the way. But in the end, everyone would get their medicine.

FROM LEFT: MARY WILKINSKELLY COURTESY BELUSHI FARMS; TYLER MADDOX COURTESY BELUSHI FARMS



Jim Belushi examines buds at Belushi's Farm. The local chapter of Elks, as well as the local Cattleman's association, both continue to have their yearly picnics on his land.