

Family discovers 13 pounds of pot

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Alamogordo resident Melodie Peil said she drove her van for more than 13 years and didn't know there was marijuana hidden inside the vehicle. Alamogordo Police Department detectives removed five bricks of marijuana from the bottom passenger side door of Peil's 1990 Chevrolet van. (Bryan Betts—Daily News)

Alamogordo resident Melodie Peil bought her brown 1990 Chevrolet van at a local dealership more than 13 years ago so she would have room to transport her and her daughter's kids.

But until Friday, Peil said she had no idea that, on trips to softball games and on vacations out of town, she had been transporting something else as well — more than 13 pounds of marijuana hidden in one of the vehicle's side doors.

"My jaw dropped when I saw that," she said.

Alamogordo Police Department Detective Sgt. David McColley said a family friend discovered the marijuana Friday afternoon when he took a panel off the side door to repair a broken handle. The metal door had been cut to make a hole in which detectives found 13.5 pounds of marijuana packaged into five bricks.



A U.S. Border Patrol K-9 unit inspects an Alamogordo resident's 1990 Chevrolet van Friday. A friend of the van's owner found 13.5 pounds of marijuana in the bottom of the door while attempting to repair it. (Bryan Betts--Daily News)

"He took the door panel off and was like 'Holy smokes. That's not right,'" said McColley.

He said the packaged bricks had likely been in the vehicle for over 15 years, since before Peil purchased the vehicle, long enough that the marijuana barely smelled like marijuana after it was removed from the vehicle.

The five bricks recovered from the van had a street value of about \$3,375 at current prices, McColley said, though the marijuana's age has made it worthless.

"The street value of it now would be nothing," he said.

Peil said she purchased the van for about \$3,500 in 2001, around 9/11. She said she needed a large van that could fit her four kids and her daughter's two kids since her daughter had been stationed overseas with the military.

The van, she said, was the largest vehicle on the lot that day.

Since then, she said she's driven the van around town and used it several times when moving as "her U-Haul" for transporting her possessions.

Peil said she had even driven the van through U.S. Border Patrol checkpoints without difficulty, including a trip to visit Caballo Lake north of Las Cruces just after she bought the van. She said the vehicle hasn't stayed around the Alamogordo area in recent years.



Alamogordo Police Department detectives removed 13.5 pounds of marijuana packaged into bricks from the side door of a 1990 Chevrolet van Friday afternoon. A family friend of the owner found the marijuana after removing a door panel to repair the door handle. Detectives said the marijuana may have been hidden in the van for over 15 years. (Bryan Betts—Daily News)

"I was just glad we found it and not Border Patrol," she said about discovering the marijuana.

Peil expressed her astonishment when detectives set the marijuana bricks, which appeared to be covered in plastic wrap and foil, on one of the van's passenger seats.

"That's all in that one door? Man!" she said. "Can you imagine if I got busted for that? My poor kids."

McColley said two other holes in the back door made it appear as though law enforcement had previously recovered drugs from the van but they had missed the marijuana in the side door.

He said law enforcement may have seized the van and later sold it at an auction. McColley said it may not be possible to locate information on the van because of changes in how law enforcement keep records on vehicle seizures.

APD Detective J.E. Paradis assisted with the investigation of the van Friday afternoon and said he once unknowingly bought a car that had been sold at auction with marijuana hidden inside.

Pardis said he had trouble with the gas tank and had the vehicle checked out. He said Otero County Narcotics Enforcement Unit knew the vehicle had been previously used for drug smuggling and found a 4-inch PVC pipe filled with marijuana in the gas tank.

"They said, 'Is that yours?' and I said, 'Nope.'" Pardis said.

He said law enforcement had previously found several other marijuana-filled PVC pipes in the car's gas tank but had failed to remove one of the pipes before selling the vehicle at auction.

McColley said it's common practice among drug traffickers to hide contraband inside vehicle doors and other concealed spaces.

"Any open area in the vehicle, they hide it in there," he said.

After detectives removed the marijuana from Peil's van, a Border Patrol K-9 unit arrived to sniff the vehicle in case more drugs remained hidden inside.

The Border Patrol agent recommended that Peil take the van to be x-rayed, and Peil and detectives plan to take the vehicle to the Border Patrol checkpoint on U.S. Highway 70 next week.

"If there's more in there, I want it out," Peil said.