As yuppies mourn, a favorite drug heads for the banned list

By Dick Polman

Let’s just call her Joy. She prefers
that name, because on Monday morning she’ll become a criminal.

Here she is, a 39-year-old career woman, someone with a view of the Center City skyline from her office
window. Someone who does things only by appointment in her carpeted con-
cupulatory milieu... yet beginning Monday she’ll risk five years in prison
for drug possession — all because federal drug enforcement officials
have opted to ban MDMA, the black little pill known as Ecstasy. Joy is unhappened. She doesn’t have
nothing to do with this. In fact, Joy is so
ungoony about Ecstasy that every time she opens her mouth, it sounds
like a yawn from an old George
Harrison album.

“Feeling very benevolent?” she
Gushes. “Have you benevolently
toward everyone? You want to kiss
your friends? You have this over-
whelming affection for people you
care about! You want your friends
to be able to do whatever you want
and you want people you love
to take this! It gives you this desire
to convert people. It is just un-
be-t לצאת-אר-ב-יר-י-ב!"

She starts to rave on about her
best girlfriend, and about how the two of them had never shared their
true feelings about each other, and about how, after doing the drug, they
were kissing on the mouth — no-
things, just honest affection...
and then the blushes. “I know it
sounds hippy-dippy,“ she says, “but
the drug strips away the layers of fear, and gives you this clarity of vision
about yourself. It’s like speeded-up analysis! I’m in therapy anyway, and there
you tend to inch along, but, with
Ecstasy, it’s just soooomatic

“And you really feel in control.
Age and responsibility have a lot to
discovering last year that it had be-
come popular in the Dallas area, par-
ticularly among exotic dancers who, apparently, were in pursuit of fruit
from the tree of knowledge.

Then underground flyers began to
make the rounds among users, com-
plete with quotes from Herman Hesse (“Only with yourself exists that
other reality for which you long”); tips on drug culture (“Prepare a
snack tray, cheese and crackers or
fresh fruit. Something very soft. Be
care sure to cut it into small bite-size
pieces.”); tips on ambudence (“Light
some incense and candles and turn
on very soft music”); and advice on
preventive medicine (“Have on hand
Rolaid or Tums, just in case of an
upper stomach”); and reminders
that, if the drug sparks bad vibes,
you should “get them out of your
system, kick back, relax, and be
prepared for the ultimate high.”

“It is not a problem of enormous
dimensions,” says Hailshim, “but it’s a
problem of growing dimensions. We
didn’t want to wait any longer. If we
waited, then the press and public
would know where we were born.” So the
decision was made to announce a
one-year emergency ban — ranking
MDMA as a “Schedule I” substance,
thus making possession punishable
by up to five years in jail. Manufacture,
sale or distribution can put you
away for up to 15 years. The DEA
hopes to make the ban permanent
one year hence.

But a Cagney butt the picture.
The DEA has banned the drug after
deciding... — citing a recent study linking MDMA, a mild
hallucinogen and a cousin in Ecstasy,
why brain damage. But there
has been no animal studies on
Ecstasy itself, so specialists don’t really
know how dangerous it is. Yet, by
gutting the drug in its most restric-
tive category, the DEA has made it
far tougher for such studies to be
conducted at all, and the specialists
who favor more research insist that
the red tape is “draconian.” Next
summer, they’ll like the DEA to move
the drug to “Schedule III” — keeping
it illegal for the masses, but accessi-
bale to the medical world.

Bill Bruce, who directs Help Inc., a
Philadelphia drug clinic, says,
“There’s probably more inhumanite

The DEA never used to pay much
attention to Ecstasy. Patented in
1969, MDMA was a forerunner of to-
day’s “designer drugs.” New chemical
substances hitched in the lab for
the ultimate indulgence of the
wistful, it never caught on as a street
drug even in the ’60s, and the DEA
didn’t take much notice until
for MDMA, instead of just asking, "Should we outlaw it?" And Frederick Goldstein, a professor at the Philadelphia College of Pharmacology and Science, adds, "Putting a drug in Schedule I does nothing to affect availability on the street. It won't affect someone in a clandestine lab if there's a profit to be made."

For the drug's most reputable defenders, the trick is to isolate themselves from the recreational zealots who make Timothy Leary sound like a narcotics agent. "Psychiatrists who use it in the course of therapy are not taking people off the street and giving it to them," says Lance Wright, a psychiatrist who works in the drug unit at the Philadelphia Veterans Administration Hospital. "Rather, it is simply a tool that can be used to facilitate a favorable development."

Facilitate a favorable development... The specialists stubbornly stick to the jargon of their trade, since there are already enough people out there like Joy, who babble endlessly about how much fun it is to cruise the museums on Ecstasy, and how liberating Ecstasy is for women (like her) who were brought up with the belief that good girls must never put their true feelings on the line.

Joy scoffs at the fear, voiced by the DEA, that Ecstasy is gaining mass popularity as a street drug. (Indeed, there are no reports of abuse in Philadelphia.) She thinks the high is too mild for anyone except yuppies who want to stay in control. "I can't see drugged-out law-lites wanting 'clarity of vision' to help them solve their problems," she says. "I'm sure they'd rather be free-basing."

But Kenneth Goddard — federal law enforcement official and author of a new novel about designer drugs — thinks otherwise. Goddard backs the DEA all the way, even if it means saying no to the therapy lobby. He says, "At first, you had the more thoughtful people using it, but I'm afraid that what's coming is a whole different thing — dealers looking for something to sell, making 30 variations of MDMA. And the variations won't be tried out on lab animals. They'll be tried out on kids on the street."
“Anyone from a full chemistry professor to a kid who arms himself with a chemistry book can start an underground lab. The DEA has to stop these drugs the best they can, because once they can become a horrible version of Russian roulette. And you don’t know how many chambers are loaded.”

“We all want a simple solution to a complex world,” says Bill Bruce. “But we have to balance this wish with the reality of having complexity in our lives. The need is for people to get some perspective.”

Tell that to Ginny, a businesswoman with a mission. The other day, sitting in a barroom booth, she reached deep into her handbag and plunked 10 Ecstasy pills onto the table. “I just bought these for a friend,” she said, fingering the pearl necklace beneath the Oxford shirt. “She wants to take them to Europe with her. She’s a vice president and sales manager for a reputable company.”

Ginny does well in the marketing world—so well that it’s no sweat to lay out $200 for a friend seeking clarity of vision. “I’m really down on the DEA,” she sighs. “I mean, how dare they?”

She considers herself too old (33) for “play drugs,” but she knew something was amiss when Debbie, her best friend, suddenly started sounding like those people who shave their heads and chant on street corners.

This was very odd, because Debbie never did drugs before. Years earlier in college, when Ginny was busy dropping acid, Debbie was always off in the corner reading her Norton’s Anthology textbook.

So for two months last year, Debbie nagged Ginny about joining the sisterhood. “You have no clue what’s in this stuff,” Ginny retorted. “We could get liver cancer or something.” Finally, she relented. Now she does the drug once a week. Her supplier won’t sell it before Monday, but Ginny has plans to buy it elsewhere. After all, she says that she can now deal with her heavy feelings about her father; that her boyfriend finally showed affection after doing the drug; that her secretary’s husband tried it at home, and wound up declaring his love for his own living room floor.

But when asked whether the eternal quest for the quick fix could ever reap real dividends, and whether anyone should risk one’s health in return, Ginny’s eyes flashed at the health in her midst.

“Hey,” she said. “Have you ever tried this stuff? I may get liver cancer, but I don’t care!”