

Nothing says I love you like a crack pipe



Andre Teague | Bristol Herald Courier

Meth and crack cocaine pipes, sold as an “I Love You Rose,” can be purchased at convenience stores throughout the region.

By [Claire Galofaro](#) | Police Beat Reporter - Bristol Herald Courier

Published: June 21, 2010

[» 6 Comments](#) | [Post a Comment](#)

vote

now [Buzz up!](#)

Sarah Trammell, manager of Andy’s Market on Commonwealth Avenue, cocked her left eyebrow and smiled slyly, holding a little glass tube – 4 inches long with a tiny fake flower tucked inside.

“It’s just a rose for my sweetheart,” she cooed.

Her clerk was less reticent. “To tell you the truth, this one’s a crack pipe,” he said. Then he picked up a longer variety with a bowl on the end. “And this one’s a meth pipe.”

For \$1.04, one can buy a Love Rose at Andy’s Market and countless other convenience stores across the country. It is a glass tube holding a 2-inch-tall flower, with a plastic stem and polyester petals. A novelty item, the stores claim. But police say Love Roses are nothing more than barely veiled crack pipes.

The meth version, the I Love You Rose, is an “incense burner,” Trammell said, and sells for \$2.10.

It is against both state and federal law to sell drug paraphernalia. In Virginia, specifically, it is illegal to sell paraphernalia “knowing, or under circumstances where one reasonably should know,” the item is used to take illegal drugs.

But, police say, proving that stores or clerks wittingly sell the pipes as such is nearly impossible.

“Some things are absolutely illegal. You can look at a set of brass knuckles and say ‘those are brass knuckles; those are illegal,’ ” Bristol Tennessee Police Capt. Charlie Thomas said. “But, take a baseball bat. People use baseball bats for a lot of reasons, and some use them to hit people. That doesn’t mean you can make a baseball bat illegal or arrest everyone who has one.”

“Besides,” Thomas said, “I’ve seen people who smoke crack out of a copper pipe. We can’t walk into Lowe’s and arrest everybody who buys a copper pipe.”

If crack addicts can’t buy a premade pipe at the convenience store, police said, they’ll find a way to fashion one out of any number of legitimate items sold there. They’ve known people to smoke out of apples, light bulbs, soda cans, aspirin bottles and one device constructed of a baby bottle, tin foil and an ink pen.

“The real question is, what don’t they smoke crack out of,” Thomas said.

Andy’s Market keeps the Love Roses and I Love You Roses behind the counter with the cigars and energy shots because, the clerk said, people tend to steal them. The box simply says “Made in China” and offers no other indication of origin. Trammell said the store buys its supply from a guy, whose name she did not know, who sells stuff out of his van. They get two boxes of each at a time – that’s 48 meth pipes and 72 crack pipes. That supply lasts about a month.

“I know that we sell them as roses in a tube,” Trammell said. “I just keep it in my subconscious; I don’t want to know.”

Andy’s Market also sells scouring pads, which crack smokers shove down into the pipe as a sort of filter to keep the rock from sliding into their mouth. Trammell said clerks are not allowed to sell Love Roses and scouring pads in the same transaction.

“Because, at that point, I consciously do know what that’s for,” Trammell said. She was not sure how much money the store makes off Love Roses, but guessed it isn’t much.

Jeff Lenard, a spokesman for the National Association of Convenience Stores, said he hopes store owners selling the pipes are making “an honest mistake,” caught unawares of the wily ways of the drug subculture. But he suspects Love Roses turn a good profit for stores that do sell them. They’re usually kept on or near the counter, prime convenience store real estate reserved for best sellers and common impulse buys.

“It’s indefensible,” Lenard said of those who knowingly sell the pipes. “They’re a head shop. And like any industry, our image is often set by those who have the worst image. This reflects poorly on all of our businesses.”

According to the federal Drug Enforcement Administration, drug paraphernalia is a multibillion-dollar industry, with most profits being made in the United States. In 2004, the agency busted a Detroit paraphernalia ring with 334,000 Love Roses, worth \$1.3 million.

For more than a decade, cities and towns across the country, from California to Florida to Washington, D.C., have arrested clerks for selling paraphernalia or hosted initiatives pleading with convenience stores to rid their shelves of the crack pipes.

Police Capt. Darrell Duty, in Bristol, Va., recalled that one local store owner, when told of the Love Roses' main use, was shocked and quit selling them. But, he said, he doubts most are fooled by the ruse.

"Some of them know what they're for and don't want to take part in the charade. Others do." Duty said. "Yeah, it's common sense, but common sense you can't prove in court."

The manager of Hillbilly Food Stores on West Mary Street sold a reporter an I Love You Rose, then pleaded ignorance and declined to give his name or comment on sales or distribution.

"I have no idea," he said. "People buy it for the gift; I never ask them what they do with it. We don't want trouble."

Thomas, in Bristol, Tenn., said that only after the Love Roses are burnt on the bottom with traces of drugs inside, do they technically become provable paraphernalia. Arrested addicts are often caught with them.

In Bristol, the going rate for crack and meth is just about equal: \$100 a gram, Duty said. A person's use of one over the other is generally a matter of personal preference, availability and demographics. Both drugs, he said, are easy to get in the city; meth is cooked up locally in kitchens and car trunks, while crack is shipped in from larger cities such as Chattanooga, Tenn., Atlanta and Asheville, N.C. The profit margin for selling crack in Bristol is huge, Duty said. A minimally connected dealer can buy an ounce of cocaine in Asheville for less than \$1,000, cook it into crack, then sell it in Bristol for \$100 a gram. There are more than 28 grams in an ounce.

The Love Roses, too, have a high mark-up. They cost just pennies to make, according to the Drug Enforcement Administration, and are usually sold for between \$1 and \$4.

A middle-aged man buying a carton of Pall Malls at Andy's Market stopped to look at the Love Rose that Trammell held in her hand.

"It's a glass tube; I don't even have to ask," he said, laughing. "And I'm an old dummy."