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From Vulnerability to Defending Cannabis Rights

Just in case my blood-test diagnosis wasn't enough, in 2016, my country's public health service denied me the possibility of continuing to take antivirals (ARVs) to control the human immune deficiency virus that inhabits my body.

Also, the university student services staff turned their back on me: "They couldn't care less." My health and well-being were in danger, so I had to drop out of school, and with tears in my eyes, I renounced my future as an architect to start off on a journey on unexplored paths, full of obstacles, pain, and frustration, but where joy, hope, and motivation have never been lacking.

In that year, the first cannabis fairs offered some confidence to people who, like me, were desperately looking

for a way not to die, to be able to stand the suffering more easily, or, as in my case, to win time away from aids. There, I met Doctors Rubén Pagaza and Raúl Porras, who recommended I fight to get back my access to the ARVs and use cannabis medicinally to improve my quality of life despite what I was going through. That's how I got involved with cannabis; later I took refuge on a remote island in the Caribbean, a paradise where I had access to delicious flowers—illegally, of course—and I shared on social media how I was feeling and the ways I was able to use cannabis.

For example, to make a living, I would ground the seeds left over from what I and my friends used, and I would make cookies and sell them to show that cannabis wasn't only a drug, but that its nutritional elements could also be used. That was when I got a call from the Xochipilli Cannabis Club inviting me to the first Prince Flor Xochipilli Cannabis Cup that was soon to be held on Cannabis Day (4/20) at Paraíso Beach, Guerrero.¹

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I didn't even think twice. I decided to meet these wonderful people in Mexico City. Their names were Karina, Alejandra, Beto, Hugo, Orlando, and Israel, although, actually, the cannabis club had more than one hundred members, all of them following the dream of its president and founder, Jasiel Espinosa.

Jasiel, who almost immediately noticed that my sexual orientation and gender identity didn't follow the norm, accepted me just as I was, supporting me like nobody else ever had. The club was so open and accepting that in a short time I was elected general secretary almost unanimously. That put me in charge not only of the club but also of a medical foundation that had a group of specialists headed by Dr. Rubén Pagaza, who I had met at one of the first cannabis fairs. Without my realizing it, all these events, harmonically synchronized beautifully in tune with each other, announced my jump from a simple cannabis user to a human rights defender.

We started by creating a big community where anyone who wanted to consume, grow, transform, take on, or develop culture by and for cannabis users could do so freely. That's how the forums, debates, alliances with other groups, cultural events and activism began, with the participation of families, academics, legislators, artists, etc., people of all sexual orientations, beliefs, races, and gender identity, without discrimination.

In addition to what we organized inside the club, we started to be activists, since in Mexico there's a politicized cannabis community with which, with Jasiel's guidance and with other club members, we were able little by little to position Xochipilli's ideals: equity and equality for all cannabis users, with an emphasis on marijuana consumers, since we were the most stigmatized.

For this reason, the club gave each member free medical care, a safe place to consume marijuana without risking being attacked or extorted by police or any security agency, workshops to learn how to grow, and legal advice about what to do in the case of arbitrary illegal arrest. All of this was available for a monthly dues of Mex\$100, which we used to barely cover the costs of the petition to legally turn ourselves into a marijuana club. We also carried out fundraising events and specialized workshops.

By that time, I still hadn't recovered my HIV treatment and all I knew was how to smoke and prepare cannabis edibles. I wasn't familiar with the social and scientific advances abroad, but 2017 was a year that everything changed:

Congress surprised the whole country by legalizing the medicinal use of cannabis, and hundreds of foreign companies descended on the country like colonizers wanting to conquer our fertile lands and use our cheap labor.

Dozens of entrepreneurs, including big sharks, tried to convince us to work with them; most were U.S. American, Canadian, and Spaniards. But what many of them really wanted was to take advantage of the club. So, we decided to only work with people or companies who treated us with dignity and as equals.

We discarded more than 90 percent of those interested and only kept a handful of allies, but they were enough to turn the project around 180 degrees. That allowed us to concretize the dream of the club's one hundred members: having our own "Marihuana House," a place where we could offer all the services and events for the Xochipilli Cannabis Club members and support more people who needed the plant for medicinal purposes.

We obtained more than one hundred legal stays while in that new house so the Mexican government would allow us to grow our own marijuana. To celebrate 4/20 in 2017, we, plant users, entered the building of the Federal Commission for the Protection against Health Risks (Cofepris), asking for 123 growing permits. At the same time, the members lit up a few marijuana cigarettes and smoked inside the building until the head of the institution came out to greet us, a bit dizzy from the smoke.

A year after that, we already had more than 500 associates. The house began to be too small for us, so we looked for a new one. This was no easy task because we were discriminated against, stigmatized, arrested by the police. They tried to jail me for holding 70 grams of marijuana that I was going to use to make Rick Simpson Oil (RSO), an artisanal marijuana extract used by people with diseases treated with tetrahydrocannabinol (THC). In my case, it helped reduce the undesired effects of the ARV treatments. However, thanks to the support of lawyers, defenders, associations, and activists, I didn't go to jail.

We faced a lot of challenges when we wanted to move house, making visible the nightmare thousands of marijuana users go through every day, harassed by family, neighbors, or authorities for trying to access our right to housing. But, even so, with perseverance, we were able to find a new headquarters; we were happy and excited about preparing everything for the reinauguration when an unprecedented event shot down all our plans: the

After three years, our camp outside the Senate was removed. So, we're regrouping to carry out the largest demonstration of cannabis users in the history of Mexico to show that we're not giving up: for each cannabis plant they take away from us, we'll grow two.

Covid-19 pandemic confined us to our homes. From then on, we partners tried to stay active, servicing the public, but we lost the space for collective consumption due to health restrictions. But even so, we managed to preserve patient care and the online radio station. The good news was that after a year, a court ordered Cofepris to respond to our permit applications for growing marihuana, and that finally turned the users club into a growers club.

But time wasn't on our side: As a way of saying goodbye, Jasiel, who had been living for years with kidney failure sent a very moving message to all of us thanking us for the efforts and the years dedicated to the club, asking me to seek out my colleagues, in reference to lgbttti+ activism. That was the last time I spoke with my best friend, my mentor, my first guide in human rights defense. His leaving made the club disintegrate and frustrated the aim of getting the growing permits. So, I decided to dry my tears to deal with an old demon that tormented me: my resentment of the lgbttti+ milieu because of the vulnerability I had felt since I was very young.

To a certain point naively, but very sure of myself, I approached the committees that organize the lgbttti+ marches to explain the delicate situation of sexually diverse people in the cannabis world, like the discrimination, invisibility, and attacks motivated by their ignorance of the right to gender identity and sexual orientation. They reacted negatively, but a handful of lgbttti+ activists supported us and later offered me a job as the project director for the Agenda lgbt civil society organization.

My first politicized act was to found the #Regulación-RevoluciónMX mobilization, together with Bárbara Orci, to promote economic, social, cultural, and environmental rights focusing on the uses of hemp, to aid in fulfilling the UN sustainable development goals.

This mobilization was supported by a dozen leaders of the Mexican Cannabis Movement and a large number of lgbttti+ activists, so we planted a hundred cannabis plants

on Mexico City's most important avenue, where the biggest demonstrations are held.

As a result, the doors of the Senate opened to us and other similar collectives to lobby for the bill that would regulate the uses of cannabis. That was when I decided to open up and democratize the discussion and invite all the movement activists in order to make sure that the law would not only favor a minority but be detrimental to most of the population, mainly the peasants. That is, we wanted a law that would promote repairing the damage done by the call to the "war on the narcos," since it was the cause of the violation of human rights in our country, above all in vulnerable communities, including indigenous peoples, farm laborers, and members of the lgbttti+ community, affected by this failed public policy.

It is well-known that we cannabis activists joined together to take over the outside grounds of the Senate, sowing more than 1,000 cannabis plants to make a series of social demands agreed upon by all the collectives and activists. However, we still haven't seen that law come into being as a safe access to respect for human rights, spaces for consumption, the right to grow our own marihuana, and regulations based on technical, scientific, and legal knowledge.

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I have recovered my access to treatment. The new drug does not cause the secondary effects that led me to use marihuana, which is why I've stopped consuming it. But, as thanks, I've decided to continue the struggle and do everything possible so Mexicans can exercise their rights based on the constitutional principles of freedom and non-discrimination.

If cannabis is giving us a second chance, let's take full advantage of it. **MM**

Notes

1 "420," "4:20," or "4/20" are all terms used in the cannabis community to refer to April 20, when the cultivation and consumption of marihuana are celebrated in many parts of the world. People also pick 4:20 in the afternoon of April 20 as the high point of the celebration. [Editor's Note.]