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Cannabis Workers' Counterstories and Stigma Reduction in Colorado

Caroline, a former manager in a cannabis dispensary in Colorado, said, “If you are interested in cannabis, you should learn to grow it yourself.” She shared this and other experiences with me as a participant in a qualitative survey and videotaped interview for a 2021 study of mine about the lived experiences of cannabis employees during COVID-19. Her statement represents a common sentiment among cannabis supporters. Also, it brings to light the wisdom of an individual who spent over 10 years growing, trimming, and selling cannabis in both illicit and legal spaces. Caroline, through the advice she offers on learning to grow your own cannabis, shows the valuable role cannabis workers play to destigmatize it. Presenting Caroline’s engagement in cannabis work and culture may help increase public knowledge

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about the growing social acceptability of cannabis production and consumption in North America and beyond.

Caroline and other cannabis workers are entangled in the process of cannabis normalization in Colorado and globally. In 2023, the World Health Organization reports that cannabis is the most widely cultivated, trafficked, and abused illicit drug.¹ This drug, or what some proponents refer to as medicine and a plant teacher, is infused with stigma, which refers to negative social views about cannabis and manifests in terms such as “devil’s lettuce.” Stigma and discriminatory behavior against cannabis users and the sector are generally rooted in the perceived harmful health consequences of cannabis, popular culture tropes such as the spaced-out laid-back stoner, and its reputation as a so-called “gateway drug” to other harmful substances for youth. The failed war on drugs is also partially behind the stigma associated with cannabis that persists today.

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The realities of cannabis as a socially acceptable cultural and economic phenomenon offer a remedy to anti-drug sentiments. Consumers recognize the potential health and wellness effects of cannabis and cannabis-derived products, contributing to its normalization. Medical patients use cannabis to help address conditions related to cancer, seizures, Alzheimer’s disease, glaucoma, and several other conditions.² Some practitioners in the psychedelic sector are expanding the definition of psychedelics—which refer to substances that bind with 5-HT_{2A} receptors in the brain—to include cannabis, despite that fact that the molecule tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), the psychotropic ingredient in cannabis, binds with cannabinoid receptors CB₁ and CB₂ in the brain.³ In 2022, the legal cannabis sector in the United States supported 428,059 full-time jobs.⁴ The individuals who devote their labor to the production, transportation and retail sales of cannabis seek living wages, health benefits and labor union rights while cannabis companies push down labor costs to optimize profits and hire union avoidance consultants to undermine workers who assert their collective bargaining rights. While Caroline’s experiences as a cannabis employee may not represent the universe of cannabis workers, her narratives stand as counter-stories to cannabis as a globally stigmatized substance.

After completing her college education in 2009, Caroline obtained a job at a pizza restaurant in Boulder, Colorado. To augment her hourly wage of US\$8.00 per hour, Caroline started working as a trimmer for an unlicensed cannabis grower in the mountains near Boulder. The illicit cannabis sector was thriving partially due to the legalization of medical cannabis in Colorado in 2000. She earned US\$25 per hour as a trimmer and had easy access to a regular supply of cannabis for her own consumption. A memorable moment for her was participating in the local festival on April 20 to celebrate cannabis culture with hundreds of other smokers in a large field at the University of Colorado Boulder. She brought large quantities of

weed and several large pizzas to the celebration, saying “It was like a zombie movie, trying to get the pizzas through that crowd because everyone was staring with big eyes at these giant pizzas.” The weed from her trimming job—that she brought to the festival and shared with friends—contributed to the success of the unofficial holiday for cannabis users.

Caroline shared a memory about an encounter with police. During an ordinary shift at the pizza restaurant, she exited the back door to an alley to take a short break. One of her friends was outside and passed a cannabis joint to Caroline. Before Caroline took a hit from the joint, a police officer on a bicycle appeared, jumped off his bike, and approached the two women. Her friend quickly put the joint on Caroline’s arm and lied about her identity in the conversation with the officer. The policeman let her friend go and gave Caroline a ticket for cannabis possession. She was fined US\$500.00 and required to perform fifteen hours of community service. After sharing this story, Caroline said that many people at the time had views about cannabis as being integrated in mainstream culture. She suggested that police officers contributed to stigma by calling cannabis “dope” and treating cannabis users like criminals. However, Caroline’s encounter with the police did not put an end to her support for cannabis. She befriended activists who advocated the legalization of recreational cannabis in Colorado and, in 2021, Caroline voted “yes” for the passage of Colorado Amendment 64, which made the state one of the first in the US to allow legal use of recreational cannabis.

Seeking job stability, Caroline obtained employment with a Denver-based community television station from 2012 to 2016. She continued to work periodically as a trimmer in illegal cannabis grow houses. In 2014, when implementation of Amendment 64 in Colorado started and recreational cannabis became available in retail dispensaries, she watched the sector increase in professionalism and regulatory compliance. As the sector matured, Caroline recognized that the hourly rate of pay for trimming cannabis in legal and illegal cultivation facilities stayed at US\$12.00 per hour. This amount was consistent no matter how much experience a person had trimming cannabis. The hourly rate of US\$12.00 was above the minimum hourly wage of US\$8.31 in Colorado but below the living wage rate of US\$15.00, which is the amount per hour an individual needed to be able to survive in Colorado in

2016. Cannabis companies offered relatively low wages to cannabis workers in a context where an expanding pool of laborers was available as the state witnessed an increase in individuals arriving from other territories where cannabis was illegal to work in legal cannabis facilities. Caroline and other workers witnessed the development of the labor union movement, spearheaded by the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union Local 7, with three unionized cannabis and hemp businesses in Colorado in 2023.

In 2016, Caroline started a job as a budtender in a legal retail dispensary in Denver and witnessed sexism in the workplace. She saw several sexually explicit social media posts on the company's Instagram account. In a meeting with the company's top executive, she told him that the company could not post sexually explicit advertisements on the company's social media accounts because customers were seeing these images and coming into the dispensary and sexually harassing female employees. Male customers were reaching over counters and groping female budtenders in their early 20s. Caroline was frustrated with the "sleazebag" in charge of the company's social media accounts. The executive reminded her that "sex sells." Also, he informed Caroline that he had a girlfriend and a mother and that he was not a chauvinist. The executive was upset with Caroline, and she thought his reaction was funny but inappropriate. She firmly believes that when you see something that appears to be wrong you should say something. Caroline understood that the executive's inability to see or address the problem meant that she shot down any hope of becoming a store manager. She left the company and became a manager of a licensed cannabis farm in southern Colorado.

In the next few years, Caroline worked different jobs in both legal and illicit cannabis operations. When asked about any concerns she had at the time about cannabis workplaces, she said that the owner of the farm in southern Colorado ran the company like a plantation. The farm was in a desolate area and near several mountains. The remote location, far from any towns or cities, likely contributed to the owner approaching workers like he owned them and treating them like cattle. Caroline managed several employees, including a deaf woman who was a grandmother. According to Caroline, "She was the sweetest, most hardworking person I've ever met in my life." The woman approached Caroline several times about the owner

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refusing to pay her overtime. Caroline communicated the concerns about overtime to the owner, who did not respond favorably. He stated that he did not want to pay Carolyn unemployment, a state economic benefit that pays a nominal amount per week to individuals after an employer terminates their job. The benefit begins after 90 days of working a full-time job in Colorado. The owner also pointed out to Caroline that they did not get along well with each other. Caroline agreed, but she believes that they weren't getting along because she did not like to see the owner treat workers like cattle.

In subsequent cannabis jobs, Caroline trimmed more weed and was exposed to trimming-related health and safety issues such as powdery mildew (PM), a fungal disease that affects cannabis and other plants. It appears as grayish and white spots and is associated with respiratory problems and dermal contamination. Cannabis workers often describe the problem of PM on cannabis plants as an epidemic in Colorado, with workers seeking to protect their health and bosses preferring to overlook PM and putting PM-infused weed on store shelves to increase cannabis sales. Caroline narrated a time before COVID-19 when she was trimming with a group of co-workers and saw a plant that was covered with PM. She requested a face mask from the manager. Her co-workers asked, "What is pm?" Caroline mentioned that cannabis workers receive little or no education about PM, making them vulnerable to asthma and skin irritation from PM covered cannabis plants. She said that PM cannabis can be used safely if it is hydrocarbon blasted with butane. This refers to an extraction process to create cannabis concentrates such as shatter and wax as well as oils for vape pens that contain relatively high levels of THC.

According to Caroline, authorities in Colorado's regulatory agencies failed to develop and implement cannabis testing policies. She described the situation as "The fox watching the hen house." Caroline presented details on

how everyone who grows legal cannabis in Colorado knows that they are required to send samples of their cannabis to third party testing companies. The process is supposedly designed to protect consumers from cannabis contaminated by powdery mildew, pesticides, heavy metals, and other harmful substances. In practice some growers select a sample of cannabis and put the sample under ultraviolet light for several days. The exposure to the light removes mold spores, powdery mildew and any bugs in the cannabis. The sample weed is sent to the agencies and passes the testing requirement. Caroline said that just because a sample of cannabis tested negative for any toxic substances does not mean that the final cannabis products are free from PM and other contaminants.

To protect her health, Caroline avoided machines used to trim weed because of the high chance of being injured. One machine called D-Budder required loading stems of cannabis plants into the machine and the machine hacking the buds off the stem. According to Caroline, “There is no faster way to lose a finger than getting anywhere near the D-Budder machine.” Also, she spoke about the most tedious part of trimming cannabis plants. A worker is hunched over for most of a full-day shift, posing risks of injury to an employee’s neck and back. She did her best to manage the chronic pain in her neck and back from trimming to increase her earnings. According to Caroline, she was an effective employee, trimming two pounds of dry cannabis in an eight-hour shift and earning US\$15.00 per hour. The owner in one of the cannabis companies where she worked paid US\$12.50 an hour to trimmers but increased the amount to US\$15.00 for employees who could trim two or more pounds in one eight-hour shift.

COVID-19 impacted Caroline and other cannabis workers in diverse ways. She said safety protocols were well implemented in Denver, and less satisfactorily in areas outside of Colorado’s main urban center. Workers and customers were required to wear masks according to state health department requirements, which followed protocols of the US Centers for Disease Control. This created some tense moments in dispensaries regarding the value of mask wearing and levels of commitment to mask wearing by company owners. Some customers were angry about the mask requirements and other protocols that were implemented such as the installation of protective clear shields at retail counters, and the inability to touch or smell cannabis products, which was allowed prior to the

pandemic. Budtenders and managers expressed frustration with customers who refused to follow COVID-19 store rules. Caroline witnessed some owners and top managers who did not follow the protective measures required by the state, making it difficult for her and other retail workers to implement measures designed to protect the health of cannabis workers and customers.

Caroline commented on the lack of health care received by her and other cannabis workers. In retrospect, she wished she had demanded health care from her employers. During COVID-19, in 2020, Caroline’s company provided employees with US\$50 hazard pay. She said that “it would have been worse if the company did nothing, but a \$50 check was a step up from nothing.” Her employer did not provide healthcare to workers. Caroline recalled having to fire a budtender because she showed symptoms related to COVID and the general manager required the budtender to obtain a doctor’s note to validate the status of her health. The company paid workers US\$12 per hour and Caroline said, how can the company “require someone to go to an emergency room to get a doctor’s note that we know employees can’t afford.” In Denver, a visit to the emergency room in a hospital costs about US\$125. According to Caroline, she wished she had pushed for health care and a few more worker-friendly policies because “I don’t think that a lot of things that our workers were asked to do were right.”

Despite stigmas and other challenges in cannabis workplaces, Caroline remains passionate about cannabis. She said, “I think that everyone should go and experience this plant. I have all these seeds that I can’t wait to grow myself. If you are interested in cannabis you should learn to grow it yourself.” **MM**

Notes

- 1 World Health Organization, “Cannabis,” Alcohol, Drugs and Addictive Behaviors Unit, World Health Organization, www.who.int/teams/mental-health-and-substance-use/alcohol-drugs-and-addictive-behaviours/drugs-psychoactive/cannabis.
- 2 Stephanie Watson, “Medical marijuana FAQ,” WebMD, www.webmd.com/a-to-z-guides/medical-marijuana-faq#091e9c5e8140f487-2-4, 18 December.
- 3 James Halifax, “Is marijuana a psychedelic,” Psychedelic Spotlight, <https://psychedelicspotlight.com/is-marijuana-a-psychedelic>, 2 September 2022.
- 4 Bruce Barcott and Beau Whitney, “Jobs Report 2022,” Leafly, www.leafly.com/news/industry/cannabis-jobs-report.