

In April 2017, Keischa N. Quiles Mercado of Arecibo, Puerto Rico, was 27 and had just started her master's program in psychotherapy, when one morning she was awoken by a series of grand mal seizures. Her mother and sister rushed her to the emergency room.

At the hospital, imaging revealed a large mass lodged in the frontal lobe of her brain — the control center for speech, concentration and motor control. Keischa said the glioblastoma that was found was “the size of a baked potato.”

The most common of all brain tumors, glioblastomas are extremely aggressive, which makes them difficult to treat. The location, rapid growth and frequent cell division make treatment particularly challenging for oncologists and surgeons. The survival rates of glioblastoma patients are poor: Fewer than 5 percent will live longer than five years; the median survival rate for patients is 15 months. Despite the odds, Keischa's neurosurgeon, Dr. Iván Sosa Gonzalez, discouraged her from reading about glioblastomas on the internet, and instead encouraged her to be positive.

Keischa went into surgery the next day for an attempted removal of the tumor.



(Photo courtesy of Keischa N. Quiles Mercado)

After the surgery, Keischa experienced a temporary side effect not uncommon to brain surgery patients: memory loss. “From the moment I opened my eyes again, I didn't even recognize my own mother,” Keischa told me.

A classmate of Keischa's remembers that time well. “The school was freaked out — the teacher, the students, the director. A brain tumor is something major,” Maria Martinez said. “When she

returned to visit after surgery, she didn't remember anyone. It's heartbreaking that she struggled so much."

After recovering from the surgery, Keischa endured 38 rounds of radiation and a year's worth of chemotherapy — and the side effects that come with it.

"Nothing alleviated my headaches and nausea," Keischa told me. "I didn't have an appetite, and I was in constant pain. I'm allergic to aspirin, and I felt that if I could survive the process of shrinking this tumor, there had to be something to help with the side effects."

Keischa's sister Clariliz Quiles Mercado relayed a story about the first time Keischa's body responded negatively to chemotherapy. Hours after her first chemotherapy session, Keischa and her family went food shopping, chatting and laughing as they strolled up and down the aisles.

Suddenly, Keischa began vomiting violently and uncontrollably.

"Keischa vomited about 30 times in just 15 minutes," Clariliz said. "I tried to help her to the bathroom to clean her up. She may have been very ill, but I wanted her to have some dignity. Although Keischa knew I was just trying to help her, she still wanted to maintain some independence as long as she could. She got herself to the bathroom and did the best she could to clean herself up.

"On the way home, we had to pull over several times so Keischa could vomit more. When she vomited blood, we knew how seriously ill Keischa was."

## **Turning To Cannabis For Help**

A friend suggested Keischa try cannabis to relieve her symptoms — her family and her oncologist Dr. David Blas Boria were completely supportive of her consumption of this therapeutic plant.

"The only thing that mattered to me was to be without pain and nausea, and cannabis could achieve that very easily," Keischa said. Fortunately, [cannabis had just been made legally available in Puerto Rico](#) four months earlier.

"We were all pleasantly surprised at how well it helped control the side effects," Clariliz told me. "It also helped with [Keischa's] mood. Instead of being depressed, she actually seemed more alive and happier. We are so grateful she has legal cannabis available to her.

"Keischa is my best friend. She is my partner in crime and I am so happy to see her managing her illness so well. She is an inspiration, and yes, she is definitely a warrior."

"My daughter is an angel," Keischa's mother Ana added. "Besides being a strong and fearless warrior, she is beautiful and a very good daughter. I am so proud of how she has handled her illness. I have fought for many things in my life, but nothing so hard as Keischa has fought to live."

## Was It Surgery, Chemo And Radiation — Or Was It Cannabis?

Two years after the surgery to remove the large tumor from her frontal lobe, Keischa is the picture of health. I met her for the first time in the summer of 2018 during a visit to my local dispensary, where she works as a budtender. I couldn't help but notice her bald head and the giant scar across her crown. I hadn't realized I was staring.

“I had a brain tumor removed,” Keischa told me with a big, beautiful smile. I let that sink in. “What's your prognosis?” I asked. “Very good. The glioblastoma was removed, but my doctors are still treating it very aggressively with chemotherapy and radiation. I also smoke lots of weed, like you,” she told me with a smile.

“Do you think it's the surgery, chemotherapy and radiation alone that are curing you, or do you think cannabis is playing a part?” I asked her.

“At first I was just using it for the side effects, but now I'm not so sure,” Keischa told me. “While I believe what the doctors are doing is keeping me alive, after I started using cannabis, I wasn't just living, I was thriving. So, who knows.”

## Studies Looking At Cannabis As A Treatment For Glioblastoma

In February 2018, the National Institute of Health published a paper titled, “[The Current State And Future Perspectives Of Cannabinoids In Cancer Biology](#),” stating the invaluable benefit of cannabis in palliative care, and the relief it offers for the side effects of chemotherapy and radiation. However, public and scientific interest has called for studies to see what cannabis can do beyond palliative care, so the NIH has begun analyzing collected data over the past 10 years. From the paper:

*The upregulated expression of CB receptors and the elevated levels of endocannabinoids have been observed in a variety of cancer cells. ... There are reports indicating that an activation of the cannabinoid receptors can impair cancer development and hence endocannabinoid signaling can be antitumorigenic.*

## BioCeuticals Seeing Positive Early Returns For Cannabis Cancer Study

In 2018, Australian company [BioCeuticals](#) began phase two of a randomized double-blind trial to assess the outcomes of using cannabis to cure glioblastomas. The trial was overseen by internationally renowned neurosurgeon Dr. Charlie Teo and Dr. Janet Schloss from the Endeavour College of Natural Health. Following completion of the trial, patients will participate in two to four years of follow-up.

The first patient to complete the trial was Elizabeth Coady of Tasmania, who was diagnosed with glioblastoma in May 2018. When she entered the trial in December 2018, her cancer had already progressed to stage 4; in fact, doctors had found three new tumors between the months of November and December. Within three weeks in the trial, all of Coady's seizures had abated. When she completed the trial on March 1, 2019, her existing tumors had shrunk, and there have been no additional tumors detected. In the summary of Coady's experiences in the trial, the authors note that "the treatment has given her hope for the future."

## The Winning Combo Of Cannabis And A Clean Diet

[Americans for Safe Access](#) is (as the slogan says) in the business of "advancing legal medical marijuana therapeutics and research." The organization's regulatory affairs coordinator Sean Khaleperi referred me to Dr. Debra Kimless, who has been working with cancer patients for many years. She is a board-certified anesthesiologist, a pain medicine specialist and a board certified lifestyle medicine medical director with [ForwardGro](#). Dr. Kimless does not accept money in exchange for the advice she offers to those with cancer who feel they don't have any other option.

"In 2016, I was referred to a woman who was on her way to hospice for palliative treatment, and was given only a few days to live," Dr. Kimless told me. "I wasn't sure I could help her, but I was going to try. I told her to give up all meat, dairy and processed foods. I suggested she try [microdosing](#). The patient had nothing to lose, so she took all of my suggestions.

"That was three years ago, and the patient is not only alive but she's been free of cancer ever since."

I asked Dr. Kimless if it was the cannabis alone that was responsible for the change — she believes it was a combination of things.

"Americans think of everything in terms of, 'If some is good, more is better,' but I look at the plant this way: We don't need to mess with what Mother Nature does on its own. If a strain naturally has X percentages of THC, CBD, CBG, etc., as well as the acid forms of the cannabinoids, why are we making extracts that contain double, triple and more of the cannabinoids? It's not necessary to 'improve' upon what nature does on its own.

"Additionally, meat and dairy and processed foods are highly acidic in our bodies, which suppresses the immune system and makes us susceptible to all kinds of diseases, including cancer. A diet high in foods that increase our body's pH — an all-plant diet — is not a hospitable environment for cancer."

In this video, Dr. Kimless speaks about a few case studies of her patients who've done well with the diet change/microdosing regimen.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5wR7CtAN9CM&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5wR7CtAN9CM&feature=emb_logo)

Spoiler: The 69-year-old man with a glioblastoma went from having multiple seizures a day to being so lethargic he couldn't perform daily tasks without assistance. Within two days of starting on a low-dose cannabis oil in combination with a whole-food, plant-based diet, the tumor shrunk. A week later, he was back on the computer and performing daily tasks on his own.

## Standard Care Vs. Cannabis

Dr. Parth Mehta is director of the oncology program at the [Texas Children's Cancer and Hematology Centers](#). I asked for his thoughts on the role that cannabis can play in cancer treatment.

“Cannabis as a therapy for cancer is not well researched at this time, so we don't know much about its anti-tumor activity or which tumors specifically it may have efficacy against,” Dr. Mehta said. “Cancer is often thought of as a single disease, but really it is a group of diseases. Curing cancer in a petri dish is very easy, but doing so in animal studies and then eventually human clinical trials is a different issue entirely.”

If studies indeed proved that cannabis could help shrink tumors, would he and Texas Children's Cancer and Hematology Center consider using it?

“Absolutely. Pediatric oncology as a specialty has seen incredible success over the last 40 years due to properly conducted clinical trials,” Dr. Mehta explained. “If cannabis was shown to be active against different cancers in the lab, it should then be used in cooperative clinical trials. The importance of studying it systematically cannot be overstated. But if it were found to be effective, there would be no good reason I can imagine not to use it to help patients.”

As to whether Keischa and others have exceeded the life expectancy of a typical glioblastoma patient because of cannabis alone isn't conclusive. However, it clearly cannot be dismissed, either.

Coincidentally, Keischa had given up meat on her own before her diagnosis — which appears to have played an important role in her health. As Keischa told me, “I prefer eating vegetables. I never really liked meat.”



What a difference a year — and healthy living and thinking — made for Keischa. (Photo courtesy of Keischa N. Quiles Mercado)

And maybe Keischa’s improvements trace back to her infectious zeal for life.

“My optimism about life is really different from everything,” she told me. “I think life can end in the blink of an eye, and for this reason we must focus on living and forget a little about a diagnosis. We have to live life and not allow anything but our optimism to make decisions for us. I always try to be a source of positive energy. I tell people not to let a cancer diagnosis change their life.

“Cancer is only a stage where we have to fight without rest, so the trick is to fight firmly and take everything day by day. And most importantly, never give up.”