

The number of ancillary businesses in the cannabis industry in the United States is unknown because new ventures form daily. From [drones](#) and point-of-sale systems to clean rooms, seed-to-sale technology, dehumidification technology and more, it's no wonder cannabis [is a \\$24-billion industry in the U.S.](#) However, as with many industries, the cannabis industry is severely lopsided. The country has a [social equity problem](#), and it has infected the cannabis industry in a bad way.

Six years ago this month, television network and news media outlet NBC published an article called "[Six Reasons African Americans Aren't Breaking Into the Cannabis Industry.](#)" Citing lack of access, lack of money, criminal records (because Black and Brown people have been most harmed by the War on Drugs), and a serious case of NIMBYism, African Americans have faced sometimes insurmountable hurdles attempting to work in and own businesses in the cannabis space.

Five years later, in February 2020, the same outlet, NBC, ran an article called [Black Entrepreneurs Struggle to Join Legal Weed Industry](#). Although the format and author of the second article were different from the first, the theme was identical. In other words, nothing has changed.

Marijuana Business Daily reports that while BIPOC represent 17 percent of executive positions in the industry, the percentage of [Black-owned cannabis ventures is holding steady at 4.3 percent](#). When Black and Brown people are successful at breaking in, many have their eye on bringing those executive numbers up, while others are taking on ancillary roles that highlight the lack of diversity in the industry. And while some Black people want to own a cannabis business, some just want access to safe and legal weed. But because of their living situations, they are barred from having access. (More on that later.)

Fortunately, there are cannabis advocates out there who want to level the playing field for patients and would-be executives and owners.

## **Meet Four Women in Critical Ancillary Roles in the Cannabis Industry**



Mss Oregon and her children

### Mss Oregon

Mss Oregon grew up on the streets of Portland, Oregon, quite literally. Many times during her formative years her family was homeless—living in many of the shelters around the city. Her father was what she calls a “super flaky character,” and as a result, wasn’t in the picture. This left her mother to raise her two brothers and Mss Oregon by herself.

Mss Oregon has three kids, the first of whom was born when Mss Oregon was 18 years old. She met her (now ex) husband at 19 and was married two years later. Soon after, he started “cheating and beating on me,” she said. “And while I hated it, I had three kids and I felt trapped.” One day, she snapped and chased her husband down the street from their home and shot him with a BB gun.

“Although the judge understood why I did it, and he even praised me for taking care of myself and my babies, he still sentenced me to time in jail.”

Having a [record is a barrier to finding employment in the cannabis industry](#). Even when it’s justified or a misdemeanor, potential employers use it as a reason to lock Black and Brown people out—without recognizing or even caring how many go to jail to begin with.

“I tried hard to get a job at a dispensary in Portland—where there’s practically one on every corner—but nobody wanted to hire me, so I created my own job.

“First we [Mss Oregon and her three kids] created [Diversify Portland](#). Our goal is to build social equity in the industry. We want BIPOC members of the industry to be more self-sufficient, and part of that is being more knowledgeable. The state of Oregon requires a [Marijuana Worker Permit](#), but our W.E.E.D. certification provides knowledge not covered by the state, including policy, regulations and how to interact with people of different races and socioeconomic classes,” she says.

“We also founded the [National Cannabis Diversity Awareness Convention](#) (NDCAC), bringing together consumers, influencers and musicians under one umbrella. Although our goal is to create a network for Black-owned businesses, the NDCAC is open to all races. Despite the industry limiting our numbers to under five percent, we don’t believe in discrimination on the basis of colour. But know if you attend an NDCAC, we will centre people of colour.”



Lyneisha Watson

Lyneisha Watson

On her LinkedIn page, [Lyneisha Watson](#) describes herself as a cannabis journalist, creative director and critical thinker, which doesn't begin to describe the powerhouse that she is. "I only have one life," Watson says, "so I want to do whatever brings me joy. And what's making me happy right now is addressing social equity both in the U.S. and abroad."

At the end of 2018, Watson pitched an article series to iconic cannabis publication *High Times*. Dubbed "High Folks," Watson's thought was to take an intimate look into people whose lives were transformed by cannabis. The series ran for nine months and featured folks with debilitating illnesses like [muscular dystrophy](#), the [grandson of reggae legend Bob Marley](#), the founder of a Maryland organization focused on [developing cannabis education for people of color](#) and [many other subjects](#). Watson remains the first and only African American woman to have a column with *High Times*.

When an opportunity arose for Watson to be the guest editor for Caliva dispensary (with three stores in Northern California), she jumped at it.

[Watson explained](#) why she was so excited about the Caliva opportunity, which is partially owned by Jay-Z: "Black and Brown people are still disproportionately affected by the War on Drugs. Working as a journalist in this space, I see so many cannabis companies that have access to wealth and resources because they have the privilege to touch, enjoy and market a plant that has continuously placed Black folk at high risk for being jailed, injured and/or murdered. My goal with being a guest editor was to centre cannabis writers of colour who will write pieces that paint a spotlight on the lack of equity in this business."

Watson is currently collaborating with cannabis writers, advocates and influencers of colour in the U.S. and globally on a series of symposia designed to look at the cannabis plant from multiple perspectives, including how it helps consumers physically and mentally, policy around the plant, social equity and more.



Whitney Beatty

[Whitney Beatty](#)

Whitney Beatty is another woman who wears many cannabis hats. As the vice president of the non-profit organization [Supernova Women](#), Beatty and her partners want to lower the barrier to entry into the cannabis space for people of colour. Through education, advocacy, webinars, workshops, networking events and helping to draft legislation, the Supernova Women want to help those most harmed by the War on Drugs to achieve their dreams of breaking into the industry and excelling all the way to the top.

Beatty has intimate knowledge of how the War on Drugs continues to affect people of color. In 2017, the city of Los Angeles (California's biggest and most populous city) began a [social equity program](#) designed to prioritize licences to applicants who are disproportionately disenfranchised by the War on Drugs. Whitney Beatty had just transitioned from a career as a television

executive to the cannabis industry with her luxury humidor company [Apothecary Brands](#), with an eye on wanting to own a dispensary that caters to women of colour.

Part of the requirements to qualify was to have already leased or purchased a retail space, which Beatty and more than 800 marginalized applicants did. Beatty leased a storefront with the idea of owning a dispensary in South LA, a section of Los Angeles typically ignored by the powers that be because of its demographics (50 percent Latino and 40 percent Black). Beatty's idea was to serve an already underserved community.

As of this writing, Beatty and others still haven't had their applications approved, which means they've been paying for a space that remains empty, unable to bring in money. "This is one more way that system is failing Black and Brown people," said Beatty. "We are being drained of our resources, while larger, well-funded, multi-state operators (MSOs) are able to expand their base and ultimately build barriers to entry for us."

It took a lawsuit (not filed by Beatty) against the city of Los Angeles to get them to add 100 licenses to the ones already received (upping the retail pool to 200 people) and finally approve the applications of 200 marginalized people. Beatty waits to see if hers is one of them. She recognizes that while the wait has been long, the opportunity is still tremendous, so she continues to wait.

"Now that I'm working both sides of the street (would-be cannabis dispensary owner and an advocate), I have a much better understanding about how we get screwed, and how important the work we do as advocates is. It's absolutely critical that the city recognize the feelings of the program and do everything they can to right the ship."



Rylie Maedler

Rylie Maedler

Rylie Maedler of Rehoboth Beach, Delaware, was diagnosed with central giant cell granuloma ([CGCG](#)) when she was just seven years old. Although the medical community is split on whether CGCG is considered a cancer, one thing they're not split on is the destructive nature of the disease. CGCG presents as bone-eating tumors, which can leave its victims with completely hollowed out cheeks and missing teeth. Given Rylie's young age when she was diagnosed, following debulking surgery to remove the tumors, damage to her face was likely permanent.

The standard treatment for CGCG is a cocktail of two large molecule biologics (meaning they're injectable drugs, not in pill form), [Denosomab](#) and [Interferon](#), along with the peptide hormone [Calcitonin](#).

While the three drugs combined would stop the progression of the disease, they do nothing to regrow bone loss. Additionally, with the long list of side effects that include a lowered or compromised immune system, lifelong muscle and joint pain, liver damage, early onset puberty and menopause, hair loss and oozing blisters, Rylie's mom, Janine, decided instead to try cannabis for her young daughter.

A surprising twist happened when Rylie's bones started regrowing. As of this writing, Rylie is 16 and all the bone loss she experienced as a result of [CGCG has reversed](#). She remains in remission, thanks entirely to cannabis (Rylie has only consumed cannabis for her CGCG).

As a result of her ordeal and subsequent relationship with cannabis, [Rylie is now the CEO](#) of two cannabis companies: [Rylie's Sunshine](#), which sells CBD oil made from her own [organic hemp farm](#), and [Rylie's Smile](#), a non-profit.

As CEO of Rylie's Smile, young Rylie has done some extraordinary things. She has [appealed to then-U.S. Attorney Jeff Sessions](#) about why cannabis legislation has to change. She has also gotten a handful of bills passed in the Delaware Senate, including one called [Rylie's Law](#), which allows children 18 years and younger who suffer from debilitating diseases to consume cannabis.

Rylie currently has a bill in the Senate that would permit those living in [Section 8 housing](#) to have access to legal medical-grade cannabis. Because Section 8 housing is government property and cannabis isn't legal on a federal level in the U.S., residents living in Section 8 aren't permitted to consume at home. With the vast majority of residents living in Section 8 being Black and Brown, this is yet one more way to deny access to an already marginalized demographic.

“I admit this wasn't something I was aware of before someone wrote my foundation and asked for me to intervene on their behalf,” said Rylie, “but once I realized there was an equity issue going on, we drafted legislation and submitted it. When I wrote Rylie's Law, I didn't write it for white, middle-class kids only. I wrote it for all kids in Delaware who need cannabis the way I did and still do.”

# Why Social Equity in the Cannabis Industry is So Important

As the industry continues growing and with the hope of cannabis becoming legal on a federal level, the United States will have to come to grips with its race issues. Despite it being legal for medicinal use in the majority of states, there are still too many people of colour in jail for low-level cannabis offences, waiting for clemency and for their records to be expunged—even in states that are legal for recreational use.

As Whitney Beatty described it, “I have a love–hate relationship with the cannabis industry. While I love to see so many states moving toward legalization, I hate that Black and Brown people have difficulty getting access to the industry. We’re still at a point where only 4 percent of businesses are Black-owned. It’s imperative that we continue to advocate for legalization in a way that does not exclude Black and Brown people, who pay the ultimate price in the War on Drugs and still haven’t seen the benefit of this billion-dollar industry built on their back. It’s beyond time that communities of colour have access to safe plant medicine.”

With women like Whitney, Rylie, Lyneisha and Mss Oregon, we’ll continue righting these wrongs.

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