

TRANSFORMATIVE CANNABIS: WORKERS DE-STIGMATIZE MARIJUANA THROUGH NARRATIVES

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Introduction

In the U.S. cannabis industry with sales of cannabis products at nearly \$25 billion and with 428,059 employees in 2021 (Barcott and Whitney, 2022), cannabis workers rarely get an opportunity to narrate their experiences. Workers' stories about occupational safety issues, earnings and Covid-19 challenges are needed more than ever to help de-stigmatize cannabis and bring parity along power lines in an increasing industry characterized by corporate consolidation and profit-making (Hoban, 2021). This chapter presents voices of five cannabis workers in Colorado during Covid-19. The discussion is informed by the notion of counter-narratives presented by Leslie Dawson (2020: 92), "As a dominant narrative can outline a widely accepted belief as truth, a counter-narrative can dispute the belief of the dominant narrative and create space for non-dominant community members to make their voices heard." Cannabis stories from the shop-floor level represent counter-narratives to the pro-business discussions that celebrate the consistent growth of cannabis sales, corporate consolidation, and oligopolistic practices of multi-state operators that amass licenses to limit competition (Title, 2022). Workers' counter-narratives are imbued with power to promote economic equity in workplaces and address discriminatory behavior targeted at the cannabis plant and cannabis culture.

Interviews with cannabis workers were conducted as part of my study “Occupational Health Concerns and Worker’s Rights in the Cannabis Space” (August-October, 2020) with funds from the University of Colorado Denver Office of Research Services. The study received approval from the Colorado Multiple Institutional Review Board. Participants completed a web-based survey about workplace safety issues during Covid-19 and were invited to participate in an optional video-recorded interview. Nine survey respondents out of 214 surveyed agreed to the interview. Five of these nine individuals are featured in this chapter. Interviews lasted between 60 to 90 minutes and were recorded via Zoom. Participants signed research consent and media release forms prior to recording. Each interviewee received a \$25 gift card for a local grocery store. I used the online platform Sonix to transcribe the interviews and manually confirmed accuracy of transcriptions by comparing transcriptions from Sonix with the original audio files. The selection of interviews to include in the chapter was determined by themes, including Covid-19-related job concerns, worker’s rights and stigma. Interview responses have been edited for clarity and length. Data from the survey portion of the study are being written up in a separate publication and are not included in this chapter.

Cannabis Workers’ Experiences

The Covid pandemic impacted the cannabis industry and the labor force in multiple ways. During the early part of the pandemic in Spring 2020, Colorado and many other states deemed cannabis as essential, creating space for businesses to remain open by following mask-wearing, social distancing and other health protocols. In Colorado, medical dispensaries and retail (adult use) cannabis stores were approved by state authorities to receive online and telephone orders and to engage in curbside pick-up to reduce risk of Covid-19 exposure among customers and

employees (Habicht, 2020; Husch Blackwell, 2020). Peter Marcus, the communication director with Terrapin Care Station, one of the largest cannabis companies in the Denver Metro Area, commented on the pandemic-driven shift in cannabis culture when he said, “cannabis has gone from illegal substance to essential service in about eight years” (Runyon, 2020). In addition to the normalization of cannabis, the pandemic contributed to a high cannabis usage rate as people were confined to their homes and increasingly turned to cannabis to address anxiety, isolation and other wellness issues during lock-downs (New Frontier, 2021). The industry in Colorado experienced record-setting sales for adult use (recreational) and medical cannabis during year one (2020) of the pandemic, amounting to \$2.19 billion and representing an increase from \$1.75 billion in 2019 (Colorado Department of Revenue, 2022). The pandemic’s second year (2021) showed the total cannabis sales in Colorado of \$2.23 billion (Colorado Department of Revenue, 2022). Also, the labor market experienced a pandemic bump. According to the “Leafly Job Report 2022” (Barcott and Whitney, 2022: 4), “After adding 32,700 jobs in 2019 and 77,300 jobs in 2020, the industry added 107,059 new jobs in 2021.”

The boom for jobs and sales in the cannabis industry related to the pandemic didn’t necessarily benefit cannabis workers. Through my conversations with cannabis workers in fall 2020, individuals spoke about companies paying low wages, being slow to protect workers from Covid-19 and appearing reluctant or refusing to provide sick or hazard pay. Geneva, one of the budtenders featured in this chapter and who works two full-time cannabis jobs, talked about her economic and social reliance on tips. Anthropologist Lia Berman in her analysis of budtenders and conditions of work in Colorado found that tips are “an excuse for low hourly wages, but for many [budtenders], tips were the income they used for daily food purchases.” (Berman, 2021: 181). Also, workers expressed their dissatisfaction with customers who refused to follow safety protocols and treated employees in disrespectful ways.

Maltreatment of budtenders by clients in dispensaries and retail stores extended to lackluster treatment of workers by cannabis companies. Andrew, one of the cannabis workers I interviewed,

64 suggested that cannabis companies treat workers as disposable resources. He said, “I’m just a pawn to keep the cash flowing.” Geneva invoked the phrase “turn and burn” to signify corporate culture that fosters a high rate of turnover among cannabis workers, which may be as high as 60 per cent within the first two months of hiring (Ramsay and Mayberry, 2020). Pinnacol Assurance (2019) in Colorado reported that 38 per cent of cannabis employees are more likely to be injured in the first six months on the cannabis job.

Two additional themes raised by cannabis workers in video interviews are job injuries and labor unions. Caroline, a cannabis worker featured in this chapter, talked about injuries among new employees. Her comments focused on the entry-level position of trimming and how individuals with little or no training in these and other cannabis jobs are susceptible to cut fingers and other injuries from the blades of trimming machines. A cannabis trade union is a viable mechanism available to workers to improve occupational safety standards, workplace protections, and rates of pay (Otañez, 2021). The Economic Policy Institute in Washington, D.C. estimated that labor unionization could increase a U.S. cannabis worker’s earnings up to \$8,690 per year. Since 2010, the movement to unionize cannabis workers in Colorado has gained momentum, with Local 7 of the UFCW (United Food and Commercial Workers Union) representing workers and winning its first collective bargaining agreements in Colorado in 2021 (Otañez, 2021). In my conversations with cannabis workers, I asked them about their views on labor unions in cannabis workplaces during Covid-19.

Individuals who devote their labor to cannabis during the pandemic contributed to the wealth of the top ten U.S. multi-state operators (MSO) valued at more than \$23.18 billion in February 2022, according to corporate valuation information about cannabis MSO in Yahoo Finance. Charlie Bachtell, chief executive officer with Chicago-based Cresco Labs, which is the fourth largest MSO in the U.S. cannabis industry, received compensation valued at \$4.47 million in 2020 (Smith, 2021). Some MSO and other cannabis companies try to distract public attention from their business practices that harm workers by portraying themselves as good corporate

citizens through corporate social responsibility schemes, sustainable development reports, and social equity initiatives. Corporate practices to appear as ethical and accountable cannabis companies contrast sharply with companies' activities that harm workers' occupational and economic health, and undermine workers' rights to organize (Otañez and Vergara, 2021). The voices of and stories from cannabis workers below collectively represent the potential to transform cannabis into a social justice platform that prioritizes social and economic equity in workplaces and derails the corporatization of cannabis.

Andrew

Andrew is in his mid-40s. In the past he worked in small business management in the contracting world and in sales and marketing in the grocery world. He spent the first three of five years in the cannabis sector bouncing from company to company to get experience as a trimmer, a gardener, and a budtender. When speaking about his most recent cannabis job, he said, "I lost my job because I needed to self-quarantine" due to Covid-19. He continued, "this doesn't change the fact that I believe that education is the key to make us a legitimate industry and having people who can speak in layman's terms to a 70-year-old customer that is looking for some pain relief, or a 21-year-old who has a lot of nervous issues or panic attacks and how to guide them into something they will be comfortable with. That's how we become legitimate." He shared additional details about the impact of Covid-19 on his employment:

I went in to work and that was the day the governor decided that we were an essential industry, and the company hadn't put out any statement until finally that morning. I walked in the building and there were 10 people standing around each other in the waiting room. No distance between them, no one enforcing it, no one even trying to say, "Hey, can some of you wait outside?" I said to my general manager, "I don't think I could do this. This is not about

my \$13.50 an hour job. This is about my family. This is about my life. I'm in my mid-40s and I'm a twenty plus year smoker.

Andrew's comment about his history of smoking was important because health authorities reported that smokers were at higher risk of Covid-19. He continued, that day at work:

I read the company's letter related to Covid-19. Basically, it said that "you're an essential employee and expected to be at work. We will provide hand sanitizer. We will clean. We will try and keep the social distance with the customers." But at the time, they couldn't force any masking or anything like that; it was just a suggestion. I said to my general manager, "This isn't enough for me. Not one thing on this paper says anything about you as an individual employee about if you feel the need to self-quarantine." I was concerned, not just for myself and my wife, but my coworkers, my customers, which again, quite a few of them were above fifty years old. I felt a moral obligation to step back. I emailed my boss, "I'm taking a leave of absence. I hope this doesn't cost me my job." A couple of days later, they sent me an email from human resources saying that the company accepted my leave of absence. Two days later, I get a call from a GM saying that after hours of back and forth and arguing with the company owner, it was decided that anyone that took the completely appropriate decision to self-isolate for their family and for their coworkers and customers was being let go.

When Andrew retold this story, he recalled the conversation he had with a general manager (GM) during his job interview:

My GM asked me: "What is your biggest problem with the cannabis industry?" I said, "loyalty from ownership. You can put in one hundred and fifty percent every day for months and at the end just be completely ignored. It is frustrating being low paid and working circles around

other people and getting nowhere. I said that loyalty from ownership and knowing that I'm willing to give as much as I'm willing to give for your company. I'd like to feel a little bit in return.

When reflecting on his experiences in the cannabis sector, Andrew said, "very few of these companies show much in the way of loyalty or opportunity to grow with them." Next, Andrew and I discussed cannabis being recognized as essential in Colorado. According to him,

When [Colorado] Governor Jared Polis made the decision to call us essential workers, that wasn't about people needing cannabis. That was about sixty to seventy million a month in tax revenue for the state. It had nothing to do with the health of the employees. That was a bunch of very well-off cannabis owners pressuring him to keep the money flowing because the state will benefit from it. The workers don't benefit from it. The people who make the money for the companies and pay taxes to the state, we see none of it. I decided at my age, I don't need to risk my life for a cannabis budtending job. I felt like I'm just a pawn to keep the cash flowing.

Andrew was asked if he had ever done something that was dangerous in his cannabis job. He said,

Absolutely. There's always something you got to do. A light needs to be moved that's in a really awkward spot, or an old fan needs to be taken off the ceiling and you're setting up a 10-foot ladder on a moving table and have to keep the table steady so you can go up and do the work. Because of my painting background, I'm very comfortable in those situations. So it never bothered me, nor did I feel like I was being forced to do anything. I was usually the best guy to do a particular job because of my background. But, you know it's cannabis. The rules, laws and regulations are very difficult to enforce.

I asked Andrew to comment on any health and safety training in the workplace that he received. He said,

Every grow facility that I was in would ask you to watch the video from OSHA [U.S. Occupational Health and Safety Administration] or the Colorado Department of Agriculture. I was certified a couple of years ago to spray insecticides, fungicides and pesticides. I had to watch videos for that and get a health check. In that respect, cannabis companies have to have some standards, especially on the [cultivation] grow side. But it is sticking to those standards that's a problem when the owner of the company was a former drug dealer and now he's got to run a legitimate business. He has absolutely no business background.

Before we ended the conversation, I asked him if he had any additional things to say about the cannabis industry. According to Andrew,

The owners could use some education on how to run businesses. I know cannabis is an experiment and we are trying to legitimize an industry that the federal government has been very wary of doing for seventy or eighty years. We're fighting an uphill battle and cannabis needs some proper voices to lead it. I have not seen many of them. I've seen some owners are fantastic voices for all walks of life. Overall, there's a real need for the right voices and some changes in this industry to make us legitimate and be federally legal.

Ashalou

Ashalou started as a receptionist in a cannabis dispensary and then became a budtender. According to Ashalou,

We are called budtenders because we're essentially like bartenders. The first thing we do is to check IDs. That's the most important thing because it is important that we do not put the business or ourselves in jeopardy. After we check IDs at the window in the front of the store we let customers inside to what we call our budroom, which is separate from our lobby. The budroom is where all of the product is located. A receptionist checks their IDs again and then we check IDs a third time when we check out customers at the cash register. That way then all the cameras can see that we checked IDs three times. The first question I usually ask a customer is "What are you shopping for?" A lot of the time most people know what they're shopping for. We explain the different effects that you can get from cannabis.

Ashalou continued,

A lot of the times a customer will say "I want edibles" or "I want like a couple of pre-rolls." Then from there, we kind of branch into whatever they're looking for. If they're looking for a pain reliever and not wanting to smoke it or eat it, we look for what we call topicals, which are lotions, and those are wonderful for people with like arthritis or inflammation. A customer might say, "I want to feel high, but I'm not comfortable with smoking it because I've got lung problems or it hurts my throat too much." Smoking cannabis is not for everybody, which is why we offer edibles. Next, I talk about *indica* and *sativa*. A lot of people get the two confused, so I learned this really awesome thing where *indica* will leave you in the couch, which I think is hilarious. Then I weigh the flower in front of the customer so they know that we're not jeopardizing their flower, or we're not jeopardizing our sales. We have that little trust between us, which I really like. I love weighing it out in front of my customers. As a customer myself, I love when they weigh it out in front of me.

I wanted to learn more about routine interactions between budtenders and customers. I asked Ashalou to provide additional details about customer relations in the dispensary. She said,

Me and other staff members do our best to guide customers through each section, usually from our flower selection to our edibles and then our vape pens making education a priority. Most of the customers that I help want exactly the same thing: high THC percentage with a low price point. This means that they want an ounce of our cheapest flower around \$85 and testing at 30 percent THC or more. With THC : CBD ratios, before I even go there, I ask them, “Do you want to get high? Do you want to feel high or are you just looking for a pain reliever or is it something to relieve the stress or the anxiety what you’re looking for?”

When asked Ashalou about one the main reasons people buy cannabis, she replied,

Insomnia. That’s probably the biggest one that I hear from every age group. It’s not just one specific age group. I’ll have adults my age in their young twenties coming in and saying, “I can’t go to sleep at night.” Whether it’s college keeping them up or they get off from work late and they just can’t go to sleep. I get people in their forties and fifties coming in with the same problems. Also, I got the eighty-year-olds coming and being like, “I can’t go to sleep at night.”

The next question I asked Ashalou was if she experienced any issues with difficult customers during the pandemic. She replied,

Absolutely. One specific example is when a man came to me when I was stationed outside the door of the dispensary. He asked, “How is this working?” I said, “I need to check your ID and

then I'm going to give you a ticket number and then you're going to have to wait outside." He was like, "Why would I have to wait outside? Why do I have to listen to you?" Then he literally said and I quote, "you're nothing but a little girl." I was very happy that I had another customer around me at the time who stepped in and said, "Dude, that's not cool. You can't just say that; this is her job. She has to do this. She's not just going to make an exception because you're being an asshole?" I definitely have customers who treat me differently because I'm a woman. I'm only four feet and ten inches, so I'm short. Not a lot of people even believe I'm old enough to be in the industry, which does frustrate me a lot. I've moved on from that. I accept it now.

Ashalou and I talked about when she started working in the cannabis industry. She said,

I got hired two weeks before the pandemic got crazy. I worked inside the store for about a week and then the pandemic hit. When it first hit, we really didn't know what to do. We were just wiping down things every like forty-five minutes, including all the chair handles, ATMS [automatic bank teller machines], and door handles. We got rid of some of the chairs so less people could sit down, and they would get the idea to wait outside. We figured out that this wasn't working so we closed for a week so our owners and managers could discuss the best options. After we re-opened, the first thing we did was a pickup where customers would order online and then would park in a specific spot outside the store. Budtenders would go outside and give people bags in their car. They would give you the cash and then you would be on your way. This involved as little interaction as possible. Everything was texting or phone calling. Soon, we realized that nobody really liked doing that and we eventually allowed one person inside at a time. We put stickers outside for six-foot distancing.

When asked if she enjoyed her cannabis job, Ashalou replied,

I love it. It's an amazing job. I just love the fact that it's a marijuana industry job. It's nice that I don't have to lie about the fact that I indulge in marijuana. It's nice that I can talk about it with my coworkers and customers. The job has its cons. It is a retail job and we do have bad customers sometimes. But all in all, it's a great job. I'm always happy to talk about cannabis. I sometimes miss it on my days off. It's a wonderful job and I love it. I don't see me ever leaving it. Also, cannabis allows the everyday person to simply function better throughout the day. Most days are the same working in a dispensary until they aren't. When I serve patients, I am reminded that Mother Nature has gifted us with cannabis, the almighty healer that creates social connections along the way.

One of my final questions for Ashalou was about how her family felt about her working in cannabis. She said,

My mom does not like it. She does not agree with marijuana being legal. When I told her that I had an interview in a cannabis company, she was not happy. When I told her I got the job and I'm still at that job, she's just like, "Are you sure that it is really what you want to do?" She will bring up college or bring up me getting another job. I'm like, "No. I love it. It's a great job. It's legal. It's ok." My mom is on the complete opposite side of the spectrum. She does not agree with the legalization of marijuana. We don't talk about it that much.

Caroline

We started the conversation speaking about cannabis harvesting. Caroline said there are two aspects of harvesting in a greenhouse:

The first is taking down the actual plant, which depending on the size of the plant, can be like a tree. Then you put it in a different part of the greenhouse or a smaller space. There are different techniques of how people dry their cannabis. If you take the whole plant down and take the very large sun leaves off, hang the whole plant down, all the sugars will collect within the buds. This is the best way to do it. Most people don't do it that way. They don't care about the sugars. They want to turn it into buds as fast as possible. Next is trimming when you remove the stems and the sun leaves. The real tedious nightmare of trimming is getting it into the perfectly round buds. A lot of people have trimming machines which can be dangerous. There are a lot of machinists in the cannabis industry who don't know any safety precautions. In my time as a trimmer, I've seen some accidents. You have to watch your fingers [to avoid machine cuts].

I asked Caroline for additional details about trimming. She replied, "The most tedious part is your hunched over and trimming like this" as she shows her tilted and tightened neck and back as part of the trimming activity. She continues, trimming is

tedious and laborious work. There's no way to do it by machine; humans have to do this to make the cannabis look really good. I would say that I am a good trimmer. I can do two pounds of dry product over an eight-hour period. The only reason I was able to push that through is because my former employer paid based on how much you could trim. He was paying \$12.50 per hour if you could do over a pound a day. If you could do two pounds a day he would pay \$15.

Mold and powdery mildew (PM) on cannabis plants are biological hazards that impact workers, especially due to skin irritation and respiratory discomfort. I asked Caroline to comment on these hazards. She said that one of her employers did not use pesticides so "the powdery mildew got in the weed. One time it got so bad. This was before Covid. I was like, 'This plant

74 is all PM. Can I please have a face mask?’ The manager was like [reluctantly] ‘ok.’ Other workers asked, ‘What’s PM?’ There was no education for trimmers.”

The conversation shifted to cannabis testing. In 2021, the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment started to certify labs for cannabis testing. Prior to 2021, cannabis was tested by private businesses for a limited number of pesticides and not tested for mold and powdery mildew. Caroline was asked to share any concerns about testing:

This was Colorado’s biggest mistake with the recreational and the medical market. When it comes to testing, they have the fox watching the hen house. The people who are making the money are the ones doing the testing. They’re the ones who put their samples in. Yes, there is a third party that tests it, but companies get to choose their samples. Every single person who grows in this industry knows when they have to send their testing in. So, they take a bunch of samples and I’ve seen this done dirty so many times. They take their sample and they put it under a UV [ultra violet] light for days and that blasts out any mold, any kind of bugs that are in it, any PM. All of that stuff is eradicated by the UV light on that one little sample that they send in. Everything else that you smoke that goes to the store is not put under a UV light. It’s got all the bugs, all the PM. And just because it’s tested, just because that one little sample was tested and passed doesn’t mean anything for the final product. I would say that my biggest concern when I’m going to purchase cannabis is the pesticides. They stay on the product. There’s no getting them off once they’re sprayed on. Really pure [free from pesticides and mold spores] weed is super expensive if it’s done right.

After testing, we switched topics. Caroline and I talked about sexual harassment in cannabis workplaces. She provided an example of a cannabis shop where she used to work in Denver that was sharing inappropriate images of women and weed on the company’s Instagram page:

I called a meeting with my CEO and said, “We cannot have this stuff that’s so sexually explicit on our Instagram. When customers come in, they’re harassing my budtenders.” At the time I was thirty one years old. These girls [budtenders] are like twenty two years old, getting groped across the counter, and we have this sleazebag running our social media with like Kush and Tush [cannabis strain] and girls’ asses. He said, “Sex sells.” I replied, “Of course, sex sells. But, what are you selling?” In his response to me and I quote, he said, “I have a girlfriend and I have a mother. I am not a chauvinist.” He was so upset at me. It was really funny because over time other people heard about that meeting and they’re like, “You called a meeting?” And I’m like, “Yeah, when you see something, you say something.” I left the company for a management position in a different place because they were never going to promote me after the meeting. I shot in the foot any hope of a management job in the company.

Next, I asked Caroline about Covid-19 and anything that she wished her company or herself did differently in terms of how it handled pandemic challenges. According to Caroline,

I would go back and demand health care. They gave us a \$50 check for hazard pay. The \$50 check for hazard pay wasn’t nothing, so I guess it could have been worse if the company did nothing. But a \$50 check was a step up from nothing. Yeah, that’s pretty sad. We didn’t have health care. I had to fire this great budtender because she’s like, “I have these symptoms and the general manager said that I need a note from a doctor.” I said, “How can we require notes from doctors when we don’t provide health care? We pay \$12 an hour, so we need to require someone to go to emergency room to get a doctor’s note that we know that they can’t afford [due to the excessive cost of a hospital emergency room visit in the US]. I really wish that I would have doubled down on my communication with the general manager because I just don’t think that what a lot of things that our workers were asked to do was right.”

Geneva was born and raised in Chicago, Illinois. In 2017, Geneva moved to Colorado to be around legal cannabis. She said,

I've always had an appreciation for the plant. Once I actually got to Colorado, what felt like one of the holy lands of cannabis, I was able to allow myself to open up to the research and get into the scientific side of cannabis. Through that, my appreciation and passion boosted me in the right direction when I started applying in the industry. You have to have your med badge to work in the field. Once I got over this and other hurdles I worked through a temp agency so that I could work with the plants. I wasn't trimming, but I was packaging. That's how I got my foot in the door.

When I interviewed Geneva in November 2020, she was working as a budtender in two different cannabis companies in the Denver Metro Area. According to Geneva, "We all have extenuating circumstances where we're either helping out family members back home or we have children or relatives that we need to take care of. The tipping part of the cannabis industry definitely helps to beef up my income."

I asked Geneva to describe an ordinary workday in cannabis. She said,

An ordinary day for me usually starts by me welcoming someone into the dispensary. Typically, there is some sort of desk or barrier before a customer gets to the sales floor. I ask them for their ID. Now with Covid there are precautions. I ask customers to take their mask down to look at their face to make sure that it's them. Once we welcome them onto the sales floor, it's really just a process of getting to know why they're there and what sort of sensations they're going for. We're not medical doctors. We cannot prescribe any sort of medication. I can share my own personal experience and let them know, when I took this or when I consumed

that, this is how it made me feel. That's kind of the way that I like to break things down. I say, "How can I help you pass the viewpoint of I'm just here to get high? I'm sure that getting high is fantastic. But are you also looking for some sort of pain relief? Are you looking to fall asleep? Are you looking to find something to increase your appetite? Are you looking to just be able to relax on the couch for a couple of hours and just play a video game? What exactly is the end goal past just being high?"

Our conversation moved into her earnings and the issue of a living wage. Geneva said,

I just got paid today. I worked my 80 hours plus maybe a couple of hours of overtime. Also, I received tips on my check. Had I not received the tips, my paycheck would have been significantly under what I was expecting it to be. The tips are a huge bonus. I think it is plausible for you to call it a living wage, depending on how many hours and your own personal financial obligations. Without tips, it would be a very different story.

Geneva was asked concerns related to security and her personal safety in her cannabis workplaces. According to Geneva,

We have a great level of security, not just from cameras, but also physical guards as well. There's usually at least one panic button somewhere around the store so you can trigger a silent alarm, if necessary. We do a really good job of checking people at the door. You can't bring in large bags and other things like that, that we think might have some kind of weaponry. We also have signs posted that say you can't bring firearms into the premises. I worry because we are in the industry that we're in and people target us just because we exist. But I also don't worry because I know we have a lot of fail safes in place to kind of circumvent whatever crazy tomfoolery anybody might suspect might happen.

Geneva spoke about the impact of Covid in the workplace. She said, “We had a couple of Covid outbreaks that we had to close down for, and me and other workers were more than compensated and kept in the loop via communication from owners. They really did make sure that we were taken care of, and if you weren’t, then you had the time that you needed to get better so that you can come back and be a part of the team again.”

I asked Geneva if it is common for budtenders to receive health insurance through their job? Geneva replied, “It depends on the company that you go with. Some of them are well established and they have everything in place for you. Others are just kind of looking to turn and burn employees and use up whatever passion workers have for as long as they’re there, and then just kind of toss them aside, so they don’t really have benefits in place.”

Another topic of discussion was Covid-19 and its impact on the workplace. I asked Geneva to discuss customers and their responses to safety protocols related to the pandemic. Geneva said that customers are mostly interested to stand in line to get their weed quickly. Customers are primarily “concerned about access to THC” and don’t necessarily follow social distancing protocols in cannabis stores. Geneva stated, “It would be nice to have better protocols in place.” She preferred to have “one or two guards watching every line at every dispensary to make sure that people are socially distancing.”

Geneva continued and described some of the safety measures implemented in one of the dispensaries where she works:

We do hourly clean and try to do them more frequently when we are busy. If we do get in that sort of gridlock [with many customers] where we only have the time to take a breath between customers, that’s when I start to get anxious and feel my stress levels rising because I feel like we need to be doing more to service the public. Part of this is making sure that the common spaces and common areas that people are touching are sanitized well. We have hand sanitizer at every cash register and at the front door before customers approach the cash registers.

We just can't do everything. This puts a knot in my chest knowing that we have people just moving in and out, and some of those people think that the virus is fake. Some of those people when counting their money, they pull their masks down to lick their fingers. This makes my skin crawl and keeps me up at night.

Before we ended our conversation, I asked Geneva if she heard anything about a union of cannabis workers or if she believes a union is needed in the cannabis sector. According to Geneva,

I haven't heard much about a union. I think it's something that definitely deserves to be looked into. I would be willing to be a part of one because we need that extra level of protection. Cannabis is becoming more of a specialized industry than it should, and you should have more in-depth knowledge about the plant and about what it can do, as opposed to companies being able to pick us up and discard us like we're peanuts on the street. People have been working towards this [cannabis legalization] for years and some people move their entire lives to be a part of this industry. So yeah, I think that deserves to be protected in one way or another.

Laura

In August 2020 when I interviewed Laura, she discussed her work as a budtender in one of the busiest companies with recreational and medical cannabis in the Denver Metro Area. She provided details about how she quit her job due to low pay and the urgency to care for her young daughter. Her daughter was shifting to remote learning due to a school closure related to the pandemic. According to Laura,

In March [2020] I overheard a client saying that schools were going to shut down. I have a daughter in grade school and when I discussed with my husband the fact that we knew that schools were going to be sending kids home, it made sense for me to quit because of how underpaid I was. I was putting out a lot of labor for little return. It made sense for me to go back to being a stay-at-home mom because I didn't make enough money to cover daycare costs.

When I asked Laura if she believed it was the right decision that she left the industry, she said, "Yes, it was for me at the time. I miss part of it. I physically shop at the place I used to work at and saw that they have done some of the procedures that other retail environments have done. I don't regret leaving but I can see that the shop just needed the same mind frame as every other retail environment to catch up to standards and protections against Covid". She continued,

I felt it is right for me to tell my employer that they did not have a good plan for those of us who had kids in school. We were also told that we would not be getting any kind of sick pay if we did catch Covid [...]. We had the kind of scheduling that I've experienced as a waitress. You are sick, you could lose your money and if you are sick too many times you are fired. So, what do you do, you show up sick. In December [2019], January and February [2020], we had a number of employees coming in sick and being sent home. No, I cannot verify whether they had any particular virus, but I worked in a culture that was too much like a restaurant, where it's your money and it's your schedule, and if you don't make it, you're fired.

I asked Laura to tell me more about the early days of the pandemic in March 2020 and how it impacted the workplace. She said, "within the first several weeks, we saw that the recreational side was still admitting way too many people in that size room. I quit, seeing that it

was becoming too chaotic in the work environment, and we had no air to talk to about things at all.” Laura continued,

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It was really stressful. The clients that came in did not respect social distancing. Clients were still asking to smell product in March or purchase product and open it and touch it. There’s just a culture in Colorado dispensary shopping in the medical and recreational sides where the client wants to be very in the face of the budtender. We didn’t have any barriers between us at that point; barriers hadn’t been established as a practice yet. There was conflict between the clients. They would start to chime in at each other across the room and hassle each other about how long a transaction was taking. It felt super uncomfortable. I was making very low wages and working a very high stress environment and have people panic buying with us. Panic buying among customers existed out of fear that government authorities may decide to shut down cannabis companies during the pandemic.

Next, Laura talked about the status of cannabis as essential in Colorado. She said, it was “frustrating that cannabis was deemed essential and there was no further mention of it. There was no dialogue about what it’s like to be a essential worker in cannabis, where there was plenty of dialogue in the news about essential work in health care, grocery stores and retail stores. It’s like [cannabis as essential] is a taboo topic.”

We talked about whether or not she agrees with the need for a union of cannabis workers. She replied,


I completely agree. I tried to look into it. [In my workplace] there were conversations about wage disparity. It would have been helpful if a union offered assistance to any employee who was running up against this problem. I asked my boss what I get paid compared to other people. People were being paid differently for the same position in that shop. If you talk to

your co-worker, you could learn that we're being paid different rates. I brought this up with my manager. She said that if I raised the issue again I'd be let go.

She added, "If my generation works harder to better the working environments now, then future Coloradoans will have a better environment that the industry will clean up a little bit and get rid of some of the worst practices. If people who are educated about workers' rights are still working at shops and expressing to management and expressing to owners what the standards ought to be, workplace conditions may improve." Laura said, "It's kind of a little scary because in the beginning of legalized recreational cannabis it was a good job. It's not a good job right now." When talking about budtenders and their jobs, Laura claimed,

Any given budtender from a beginner to a person serving the medical side every day, has every product completely understood. We function in the same capacity as a pharmaceutical tech who expresses to a client what they should and should not do. And the amount of basic scientific knowledge, I would describe it like a seventh-grade science lesson [that budtenders provide clients]. These are not jobs that anyone can do right off the bat. When you are face to face with clients who are coming in with chronic pain or multiple sclerosis or a traumatic brain injury and now that PTSD is on the list of medically qualifying conditions, there are many conversations that a budtender has with a client that are uncomfortable and require someone who already has the maturity and can understand a HIPPA relationship of not sharing private information with anyone else on staff. I feel it is important for unions to recognize that the position of budtender is not just as a bartender, that certain levels of understanding of physiology and psychology that a good budtender should have, it should not be a beginning level job.

I asked Laura if she had any additional things to say about the industry or herself. She replied, “I don’t want to send my daughter into this industry. I have a daughter and I want her to be proud of being in a state where people have access to a product that can get them off opiates. But it’s not an industry that’s worth working for yet, especially not for a woman.” Laura narrated an experience with a client who told her a sexually inappropriate joke that she reported to management:

The first time I did that they asked me to continue to serve the guest. That didn’t go well. Later, the client came and told the exact same joke to other young female budtenders. Finally, a year later he was banned as a client. It took more than one staff member reporting the same issue to more than one manager. Also, there was a real bad culture of homophobia and our staff was very diverse. One manager on staff was known for saying inappropriate things to females or gay staff members. They created a toxic environment. But, if it’s your boss, you don’t say anything. 

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