

401 Counterculture: The Thomas Slater Compassion Center



The issues of medical and recreational access to cannabis is no longer the wistful dream of an outlawed minority. It is our reality, our present, and our ticket to a brighter future for a better nation. Despite late-in-the-game, desperate Hail Marys by the fanatics who stand fast on the sinking ship of prohibition, our national spirit is open and ready for reconnection with a sacred plant.

Misinformation, tales of triumph, and controversy abound in the coast-to-coast slug-out currently in progress over medical and recreational use. But often lost in this maelstrom are the stories of the medical patients who are living and dying by the success or failure of legislations over their safe access to effective medication. Every headline over another state voting to allow medical access to cannabis is an emotional victory and a feel good moment for all those in support of the cause. But until that average citizen seeking relief from a multitude of ailments is able to walk safely into a secure facility near their home and purchase inspected and reliable medicine prescribed by their doctor, we are still losing.

Rhode Islanders who follow this issue know of the milestones and setbacks of the Rhode Island medical cannabis program. And at the front of this battle is the Thomas Slater Compassion Center, the first medical cannabis dispensary in the Ocean State. On April 19, the facility celebrated its first year in business with a party for its patients. This first of hopefully many more anniversaries is probably the most important of these milestones. It represents a year that Rhode Islanders have enjoyed legal access for patients who depend on this medicine for their health, happiness and sometimes very lives.

To mark the importance of this anniversary, I sat down with Gerald McGraw, CEO of the Slater Center, co-founder Liz Joseph and press liaison Chris Reilly for a discussion on just what this meant for Rhode Islanders and the road they've taken to get here.

Adam J Schirling: The average person who is not involved in the medical marijuana community may not be familiar with what a business like TCS had to go through to gain legitimacy. So let's start with a synopsis of what got you to this point.

The Slater Center (Gerry): It was a long, grueling process. We went through a regulatory process that took about three years. Before we were awarded the license, the state government shut the program down. The legislation was modified to plant counts, which would be 150 total plants, 99 mature, 51 immature. That capping of the amount of cannabis we can have on hand is what finally got it to pass.

AJS: What was the amount of time that passed after medicinal cannabis was approved in the state of Rhode Island and your application for your business was actually approved?

TSC (Gerry): Well, the medicinal was passed in 2006, and the amendment to allow three compassion centers passed in 2009. From 2009 until last April is the span that the team had to put everything together. About four years.

AJS: Was it working with lawyers and lobby groups and working on your application? Or just trying to change the governor's mind on the legitimacy of the program?

TSC (Gerry): Well there was a whole process that we had to go through before we even got to the point to put the documentation in. That process took about three years. and then we spent about a year or two in review of the application.

AJS: What kind of work with lobbyists and patients went into getting the application approved?

TSC (Gerry): Well we got involved with RIPAC. I was a caregiver for a patient who was involved, and that's what got me motivated to move forward with this. We all knew we had a long road ahead of us, but we had the passion to do this.

TSC (Liz): It never seemed right that something so healing and benign was so taboo and so ... bastardized and it's a plant. In 1985, my mom was very sick with cancer and she passed away. She was given cannabis and it was something that she needed to hide. It was almost shameful and it never made sense to me. It was effective. To have something so natural and healing and effective be so looked down upon. Especially someone from her generation, she felt seedy...

AJS: So that was something that solidified your belief and desire to work in the cannabis industry?

TSC (Liz): It did; I was around people who cultivated it growing up and it was something I took interest in. So when this whole thing came out, it just started out as an idea. Three friends who had a great idea. And it started out very grassroots. Handwriting applications, brainstorming logos ... it was very mom and pop. But this one got tunnel vision and every roadblock we hit, and we did hit several, this one always pointed us in the right direction. When we started out, on the initial application, they were asking us to describe how we would cultivate enough medicine to accommodate the entire patient population. So we still face challenges because we went from learning how to cultivate all this medicine to accommodate all these people, to the 99 plant limit. Financially, we certainly still face obstacles. Something people don't understand is that we buy at a certain premium, and then we turn around and still have the regulatory process with taxes and insane overheads and loans that we had when this was put on hold for so long.

AJS: After the long process was done and you were finally able to open the doors, what was the initial reception to your business from the local community?

TSC (Gerry): Out of the gate, they were a little hesitant. They thought this might be a place where people used on site or came to hang out. But once we opened our doors, they see how discreet it is and we are a great neighbor. We give back to the community and we try to be a great neighbor.

AJS: Are there any opponents to the center?

TSC (Chris): From an opponent standpoint, it's been very limited. When we see people who demonstrate any level of concern, normally it's a misunderstanding of what we do versus legalization in general. For instance, there is a group in Barrington that is very involved in prevention of drug use in youths and they may have some misunderstandings of medicinal use versus recreational use, and we talk to them about it. We reach out and have discussions and I think once people understand that this is a facility where only licensed patients can come — we aren't opening up our doors to children or just anyone — once people hear what we do, that we are regulated, that doctors regulate people, they understand more. We are a place that is hiring people and creating jobs. That's not happening on this block of Providence that often.

AJS: How many people are employed at the center?

TSC (Gerry): About 56 with benefits.

AJS: How would you see the role of the Slater Center changing or evolving if legalization legislation passes in Rhode Island in the next few years?

TSC (Gerry): We are just an option, but we want to be the best option out there for patients. We want to give them safe, affordable access to medicine. As far as legalization, that's a different animal. We are more concerned with the medical aspect and the care of our patients.

TSC (Chris): Legalization and medical use can work hand in hand. They are working hand in hand right now in Colorado, recreational structure along with a medical structure. The thing that would be great if it happened here ... take a service member returning home with PTSD. Right now our state doesn't recognize PTSD as a qualifying condition, and that's shameful. I don't know how we can send these people off to horrible parts of the world and when they come back broken, a doctor says that this can help you but your PTSD isn't recognized. Well to have that back-up where if you can't get in through medical but if you are over 21 you can get it. That can work and the two programs can complement each other.

AJS: Something you don't hear a lot about is the compassion program. Can you tell me more about that?

TSC (Liz): What we do is probably give away every month about \$25,000 worth of medicine through our compassion program. We never want to see any patient have to go without. Impoverished, end of life patients ... we try and help as much as we can.

AJS: What do you feel like the average patient experiences the first time they come in for medicine?

TSC (Liz): I've heard a lot of feedback about this. I think in the beginning when they first walk through the doors, there is a natural trepidation just because you don't know what to expect. But I feel as though it is one of our primary goals to make people feel comfortable and welcome and to see that this is a good place. The staff really takes their time with the patients and their knowledge is amazing. A lot of people say they like just being in our atmosphere.

TSC (Chris): Think about what people were faced with before this. If they didn't grow or didn't have a caregiver, they might turn to an illicit source. Why should people have to go to the street if they are sick and their doctor says that they should use this? Now they can come to a place that is safe, regulated and the medicine is tested. Not too many drug dealers out there are testing, making sure there are no

molds or contaminants, but these people do. It's great, it's elevated.

AJS: Chris mentioned that you are currently working with pediatric patients and working with a provider at Hasbro.

TSC (Liz): Yes, it's the CBD project. The doctors at Hasbro came in and met with us and told us about these patients who are severely epileptic, just a very very debilitating disease. Maria, our office administrator, works very closely with the parents. Every day they come and they are dialing the dosage, making these concentrates of this high CBD oil. Our youngest patient is 3 and it is just amazing. Some of them are going from having 500+ seizures a day to maybe 2 or 3 or even none. They could not get those results with any sort of pharmaceuticals.

TSC (Gerry): The parents are just blown away. They send us video updates all the time, like a child doing puzzles where they couldn't do anything before... Really just blown away...

AJS: What is the biggest thing you want people who may not be familiar with the Slater Center to know about this place?

TSC (Gerry): I wish they could come stand in the center for an hour. I mean if you aren't crying from seeing these patients' lives change just because the center is open. You know, they won't get it until they see it. They may not get it until someone in their family needs cannabis to help them.

TSC (Liz): I would want people to know we are truly about compassion, that is the absolute truth.