

Notes From NECANN: A firsthand account of the New England Cannabis Convention

Sunday, March 20. Boston, MA. Hynes Convention Center. New England Cannabis Convention (NECANN) Day 3.

Morning drive from Providence to Boston: the fog was lifting, the sun was shining, everything was white. Listened to the radio. Sang along to everything. Fog parted just outside Quincy. Seagulls perched atop the beauty supply building in Roxbury. Blue sky background. Pigeons took flight as the light turned green. Felt like a movie.

Parked by Bukowski's. Walked to Hynes. Front desk security guard said, "Good morning, how are ya? You're all set hon." Felt real special. Felt sexy not wearing a mask. Walked dramatically into the convention center; not premeditated. A table at the entrance played "Baba O'Riley" and projected a starscape onto the wall. It's impossible not to strut in a scene like that.

Got to my booth. The first booth on the left, next to the BIC lighter table, near a cannabis breeder, across the aisle from a cannabis supply company and a cannabis display company. Met my co-booth mates. Kind people. They told me Dr. Marion McNabb was speaking at noon.

Met a man dressed as an astronaut. He was from Maine but people call him Kentucky. He posed for a photo then gave me a goodie and his events director's business card.

Met Anna May Meade, co-author of *Cannabis: A Big Sisters' Guide*. Meade is an environmental scientist and technical writer. Her book is a perfect guide for beginners who are curious about cannabis but unsure where to start. It's full of pictures and digestible facts that detail in plain language the terminology and science of the plant, the various methods of consumption, how to navigate a dispensary, first-person stories, the endocannabinoid system, and so on. It's a pocket guide resource that speaks to the science and benefits of consuming cannabis and shows how, when equipped with knowledge, plant medicine is nothing to fear. I bought a copy and Meade signed it: To Meg, Enjoy the journey. Anna.

Met a kind man who does tech things for an event company; he shared some photos he took. Met some CO₂ extractors. Met a budtender interested in reformatory justice. Got free lighters from the BIC table: Guns N' Roses, Janis Joplin, a spaceman throwing horns, and a classic all black BIC. Met a woman who doesn't like the flavors companies inject into cannabis products. I told her I don't like that either and the company I work for doesn't add any flavors or additives to its products. "There are only three ingredients: flower, organic avocado oil, and organic sunflower lecithin; that's it." She was interested. Met a man with a Keith Haring backpack. I complimented it. He said, "He's my favorite artist." Then he shared samples of his own artwork. Went to the exhibitors lounge. Made an orange spiced tea. A man came in after me and said, "Will you judge me if I drink this?"

"Drink tea?" I asked.

"Yes. Tea's not very manly, is it?"

"I love tea."

"But you're not a man, are you?"

"No, I'm not."

"Tea then, it's not very manly, is it?"

"I think it's plenty manly."

"Oh they'd have me where I'm from, it's not manly enough."

"Where are you from?"

"I'm from Ireland. We're here on tour."

And that was that.

Went to see Dr. Marion McNabb speak. Brown boots, blue skirt, wide brimmed hat, red feather weaved into her hair. She presented study findings and focused on ways we can use data to drive change. Learned about iCount, a new program from the Cannabis Center of Excellence that makes it easy for consumers, patients, medical providers, and industry professionals to share their opinions, form connections, and learn from each other.

Left the building for lunch. Walked toward Copley. Felt insecure. Didn't recognize the street. Boylston's changed. Had to use my phone to find things. Felt pathetic. Went to BGood because there weren't many affordable options. Ordered food from a kiosk. Zero human contact until a sweet woman yelled "Megan" from the back and asked if I'd like some ketchup. Ate food outside at a wobbly table. A child cried for his hamburger beside me. Said he wanted more ketchup. I didn't like him. Then I disliked myself for disliking him.

Walked back toward Hynes behind 5-6 members of the Northeastern hockey team. Athletes have the most confident walks. I admired their youth. I admired their sport. I admired these confident young athletes until they stopped dead in their tracks and blocked the sidewalk while they figured out where to go next; then, I despised them.

Went to 7/11 for floss but they were out. From what I could tell the 7/11 amenities aisle was out of two things: dental floss and condoms. I liked this. Went to Walgreens. Got floss. Cost \$9.99. I did not like this. Why does floss cost \$10?

Outside Hynes a person in a pink sweatshirt with Boston scrawled on it said, "It smells like pot." Then another person in a navy sweatshirt with Boston scrawled on it pointed to a sign and said, "I wonder why." Then they both laughed.

Went to the first floor bathroom. Washed my hands, flossed my teeth, washed my hands again. A woman beside me stuck her hair under a running faucet, then combed her hair into a bun. She left the bathroom saying, "Oh well, this is as good as it's going to get."

Got back to the booth. Met a man with a Sanskrit tattoo. Met a man interested in investing. Met Dan Adams. Sort of freaked out. Despite his name tag, which clearly read "Media - Dan Adams," I managed

to go several minutes without knowing who I was talking to. Felt like an idiot.

I told him I liked his work. I told him I am also a writer. He said, "Cool, what do you write?" I said, "I like to write little profile pieces on people I find interesting." And he told me he likes the framework of journalism, says it gives him focus, says when he starts to diverge, when he broaches upon creative nonfiction or fiction, he starts to wonder how much of himself he is putting into the piece, like how does he know what adjective to use—is this the right adjective? or is this just me? I said I try to recognize the patterns, I try to pay attention to the words people use, to the themes they bring up, and to the tone they use when they're talking about whatever they're talking about and use all of that to show me what words to use. And he said, "That's good advice" and I don't remember much after that because I was #fangirling.

But I remember a brief chat about RI legislation. He wanted to know: What's going on in RI? And I was useless. I couldn't speak to it because I've never understood it. What *is* going on in RI? I made a pledge to learn more. We talked briefly about cannabis press coverage in general, how it's kind of stiff, how it distances itself from the reality of the scene. He is trying to achieve something more, to write compelling pieces that lead with facts, not flair, and read with the understanding of a writer who knows and cares about their subject. I really don't know if we talked about much else, I was just sort of stoked. It's a thrill meeting someone you admire.

Toward the end of the show I met a man from Northampton who used to live in Boston. He didn't recognize Boylston Street either. Said he felt lost. He wanted to learn more about cannabis tincture for his wife who has difficulty sleeping and doesn't like the euphoric effect of THC. We discussed different CBD formulas and a nighttime tincture, talked about how the body continues to metabolize tincture while at rest, so people who find relief with these tinctures usually find it helps them ease into sleep as well as stay asleep. We discussed the importance of starting out slow and the importance of listening to your body, then I shared some resources.

Around 3:30 a voice came over the loudspeaker and thanked everyone for attending. It said it hoped to see us all next year and that the event was over. Exhibitors disassembled complex booths with professional speed and packed their gear in neatly arranged boxes then hauled them away in rolling carts and suitcases. As we packed our booth a man appeared with highly magnified photographs of trichomes. In *Cannabis: A Big Sisters' Guide*, Anna Meade describes trichomes as, "Hairs around the flower that look like sugar frosting. These hairs make resins, or essential oils, that contain cannabinoids, terpenes, and flavonoids, which give each strain its flavor and personality." I took the man's photographs, they are bright, sort of sexual, figured they'd be good for collaging.

On the walk back to my car I started feeling sad about Boston. I started feeling nostalgic for people and places and times past. I remembered sitting in the window of Engine 33 and watching the marathon with my kid sister; we looked out on Hereford and cheered and cried, brought to tears by endurance. Remembered spending hours watching foot traffic from a nook in the library that's no longer there. Remembered spending entire days at the library studying in Bates Hall, reading in the courtyard, often just sitting out front watching and taking down notes. Remembered drinking at The Pour House with James and every so often with Evan and Pete and on special occasions with Greg. Remembered getting burgers and beers with James at Bukowski's practically every night before catching our trains. Remembered standing over 90 in the summer watching semis pass by. But I couldn't linger in this sadness. The sky was too blue, the sun was too bright, there were too many people around me having a good time, everyone was laughing and smiling.

One of the most common effects of cannabis consumption is laughter. Take too much of it and that laughter can turn into paranoia and you may green out (aka feel like you're having a panic attack), but if you educate yourself on what you're taking, if you learn how the product you're consuming is made, if you start off slow and see how different amounts and methods affect *your* body, if you speak to a medical provider who is familiar with the endocannabinoid system and views cannabis as a plant that, just like chamomile, offers myriad benefits, then you may avoid the green out and enjoy the laughter.

The thing is, unlike chamomile, this plant has been stigmatized and criminalized (see the War on Drugs). The DEA describes it as "mind-altering". It's classified as a Schedule 1 substance under the Controlled Substances Act, meaning, "it has a high potential for abuse, no currently accepted medical use in treatment in the United States, and a lack of accepted safety for use under medical supervision."

But if you dare challenge this assessment and analyze what you've been told by embarking on a journey rooted in history, culture, science, and testimonials, then you'll learn people have been consuming cannabis safely for thousands of years. You'll learn every human body is equipped to receive cannabinoids thanks to our bodies' endocannabinoid system. You'll hear stories of epileptics who've been seizure-free ever since consuming cannabis regularly. You'll read stories of children with non-verbal autism who are able to communicate. You'll learn of people who've reduced their opioid dependencies. You'll hear stories from people who've found relief from chronic pain, depression, anxiety, and psychological trauma. You'll learn of a veteran population that relies on cannabis to reduce prescription medications and relieve symptoms from all sorts of ailments, chief among them: chronic pain and the psychological effects of PTSD. You may learn one of the major difficulties surrounding cannabis research are regulatory barriers that make it difficult for researchers to gain access to medical cannabis *because* of its Schedule 1 status. You may even learn that there's only one approved cannabis cultivator that researchers receiving US government funding can work with—a University of Mississippi cultivator that does not produce the type of cannabis you'll find at a dispensary. Chances are, the more you learn, the more you'll question.

For me, and many others, part of why we work in this industry is to get rid of the stigma surrounding cannabis. I believe this will require a cultural shift. It'll require we pivot away from our recent history and policies that stigmatize cannabis as highly addictive, destructive, and unsafe; it'll require we recognize the cultural significance this plant has for people all over the world; it'll require government-funded research into the beneficial properties this plant has to offer, not just the harm it may cause if... it'll require we see pharmaceuticals as *a form* of medicine, not as *the only* form; and, it'll require we look at cannabis as it's been seen for most of human history: a plant that helps people enjoy their lives.

We're not making claims, we're not calling cannabis a cure-all, and we're not saying it's for everyone. But we are saying this is a plant with a history, it deserves our respect, and we have a lot to learn.