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June 9, 2015

Pot Class- Final Story

When Brie Malarkey tried to open a boutique-inspired medical dispensary in rural Southern Oregon, the pushback from the community was more than she had ever anticipated. On the road to becoming the first legal dispensary in the Rogue Valley she faced a recall election, threats from the local church to drop community support and a struggle to find a renter who would allow a dispensary under their roof.

“So many property owners were very afraid of me,” Malarkey recalled. “I had doors slammed in my face, I had the phone hung up on me.”

As Malarkey experienced, the feel towards marijuana in rural Southern Oregon isn't as accepting as in other parts of the state. In this area of the state, one fifth of the population is over 65 years old, and the sudden change in legislature is widely opposed because marijuana is still viewed as a harmful drug.

Back in November, 22 of Oregon's 36 counties voted against Measure 91. Most of the opposition in the state was from rural counties, and in some of those counties the measure failed with as high as 65%. But more urbanized counties were the driving force behind the passing of Measure 91, including Lane and Multnomah counties, housing Eugene and Portland respectively. In Lane County the measure received 60.2% of votes in favor and Multnomah saw 70% in favor.

While Oregon moves ahead with the implementation of its newest measure, citizens in rural counties have been left trying to adapt to the change in culture.

Malarkey's dispensaries in Gold Hill and Ashland, are in Jackson County where Measure 91 passed with just 53%, or 42,950 votes. But her Gold Hill location, which is near the border to Jackson and Josephine County, is where she experienced a roadblock. Josephine County is one of the 22 counties in Oregon where Measure 91 failed.

Gold Hill, Oregon, is a small, rural town of 1,247. The town mostly consists of people in their early forties, earning just enough to get by- many working on the farms that surround the town.

One main street runs through Gold Hill that is reminiscent of the old, gold mining town for which it was named. A bridge just wide enough for two cars spans the Rogue River on the way into town. And there, just two doors down from the local church, is Breeze Botanicals.

By looking at the dispensary, it's not obvious what's inside. A little blue and green sign above the door reads "Breeze Botanicals," the word "breeze" written in a flowy cursive font. And just next to the sign, a green pharmaceutical cross- the symbol for medical marijuana.

Malarkey is a self-taught herbalist who focuses on learning about traditional Native-American blends to create natural medicines for her patients. But in her dispensary, the focus is on the healing power of all herbs, not just marijuana. Breeze Botanicals boasts over 50 different herbs, and Malarkey says she works hard not to glorify any one plant.

"One of my greatest loves is to turn people on to others herbs besides cannabis," Malarkey said.

In her shop, Malarkey makes a variety of blends for her patients, some incorporating cannabis, others with herbs like lavender and yarrow. One of her favorite activities is mixing new types of marijuana- laced products for her patients, including herbal teas and elixirs.

"I'm kind of a mad scientist," said Malarkey.

Malarkey started working with medicinal herbs in 2006. She had some experience growing medical marijuana for her mother, husband and two elderly women and a background in managing an artisan boutique in Eugene. And when her kids went off to college she decided it was time to share her medicinal plants and herbs with the community.

But rather than opening a regular dispensary, Malarkey wanted to go open a boutique inspired business.

"The way dispensaries should be in my opinion," Malarkey said.

But when it came to putting her business plan into action is when roadblocks began. She first had to find a building owner who was willing to let a dispensary operate under their roof, but many refused.

After some searching, Malarkey eventually found a building in Gold Hill that had been vacant since 2008 and an owner who was willing to let her rent the space, so long as she could get a city license.

To earn the license, Malarkey presented her business plan to the city council and helped them establish a city ordinance for her shop in Gold Hill- the sole dispensary in the town. The plan included rules such as hours during which the dispensary could be open and no visible product allowed in the store's windows.

After a month of working with the city planner, Malarkey was finally granted a license by the city council. However, when citizens learned she had been granted the license, Malarkey faced disapproval from residents all over the town, including the pastor at the nearby Harvest Time Fellowship and a member of the town's budget committee. And last spring, community members spearheaded a campaign to recall four of the city councilors who granted Malarkey her business license.

In a letter to the city manager, Harvest Time Fellowship even threatened to withdraw its support from the community festival if Breeze Botanicals was allowed to open shop.

"Our continued support of the children's activities from this popular event may no longer be possible if we are located next to a dispensary," Pastor George Wilson wrote.

At the next city council meeting, Malarkey recalled the chambers were standing room only. Yelling citizens filled the room, expressing their anger with the proposed dispensary.

"I wasn't really aware of all the discrimination that was out there," Malarkey said. "It really kind of shocked me."

Nearly half of the town voted in the recall election in August, which failed when 60% voted to keep the councilors in office. Then, after receiving the go-ahead, Malarkey opened shop on June 9, 2014. As part of opening her dispensary, Malarkey is required to tax 5% on her products that include marijuana. To date, this tax has brought about \$2500 to the town.

This tax at Breeze Botanicals, as well as the tax that will be placed on recreational marijuana, seems to be one of the driving forces behind the legalization of recreational marijuana.

According to Legislative Revenue Office economists, an ounce of legal marijuana in Oregon is going to cost about \$330 or \$12 a joint. When it comes to state income, Oregon economists estimate that in the first year the estimated state net revenue is between \$6.5 million and \$12.8 million, with 20% of the income going to cities and counties for use by local law enforcement.

When it comes to states that have already legalized, according to the Colorado Department of Revenue, the state brought in \$52,570,081 in marijuana taxes, licenses and fees during their first year of recreational marijuana sales.

While previously legalized states have experienced the increase in income, they have also experienced the shift in culture just like that in Southern Oregon. And the culture shift is not unique to Gold Hill.

In Central Point, another Jackson County city, 77-year-old resident Harvey Tonn is one of those who has seen the swing in opinions towards marijuana.

During his childhood and teen years, Tonn didn't have any experience with marijuana. It was only during adulthood that he came to view marijuana as a drug that was "strongly addictive and led to the use of stronger drugs."

His views on marijuana have been strongly influenced by his time as a middle school dean when he had to deal with students using on campus.

"I'm not a supporter of recreational use," Tonn said. "I believe there is more harm than good when used recreationally."

But during the past few years, and considering the research that has been conducted on marijuana, Tonn no longer views marijuana in the same category as other addictive drugs, and he has come to accept its use as a medication.

"For some people, medical marijuana is a valuable tool if it's not abused," Tonn said.

This changing opinion on marijuana is part of the plant's journey to becoming mainstream.

Former Denver Post reporter and current editor of The Cannabist Ricardo Baca recalled how the continued discussion of medical marijuana has brought the plant to the spotlight in recent years.

"The more often people talked about it, the more it became part of the public," Baca said.

Baca also believes this public discussion was elevated by the fact that marijuana legalization was on the ballot during the same time that Obama was being elected. And while the younger generations were voting for the first black president, they were also voting for change in marijuana legislature.

It may take some time for this culture shift to make its way to older generations, but acceptance is coming.

Nearing a year in Gold Hill, the fuss over Malarkey's shop has since died down.

Breeze Botanicals is gearing up to celebrate one year in business on June 9. Through the entire year, her shop has not had one instance of crime or any other complaints, refuting the worries that her dispensary would bring trouble to Gold Hill.

According to the Gold Hill City manager Rick Hohnbaum, since Malarkey's dispensary has opened, Harvest Time Fellowship hasn't acted upon its threats. And some citizens who originally opposed the dispensary have come to see Breeze Botanicals presence as just another business in Gold Hill.

As for what Gold Hill city council will do when recreational marijuana comes in to play, Hohnbaum says they haven't discussed anything yet. The council is "waiting to see what state legislature does."

Malarkey isn't planning on getting involved with the recreational side of marijuana yet. Her current focus is on her medicinal line called Sun God. The line has products in dispensaries all over Oregon, including Bend, the Oregon Coast, Eugene and Salem. She also is working on getting involved in supporting the local festival and giving back to those that helped her bring her business to where it is today.

"We're just trying to be good members of the community."