



# 13 Women TO WATCH

Welcome to Marijuana Venture's 10th annual feature highlighting women in the cannabis industry. This year we are proud to bring readers the stories of 13 influential professionals helping to shape the industry through their leadership, insights and visions for the future of cannabis. The following women hail from a variety of backgrounds and each bring their own unique skillsets, experience and perspectives for the betterment of the industry. It is an honor to share their stories.

We've  
spent  
10 years  
proving  
this is  
possible.



## Jennifer ROBERTS

**BANKING PIONEER | Ten years ago, Jennifer Roberts introduced a pilot program for cannabis businesses in Washington state. With its innovative and determined chief operating officer taking the lead, O Bee Credit Union has held firm on its mission to serve the underserved by providing access to banking for state-licensed businesses and their employees.**

To this day, access to traditional banking services remains a problem for thousands of cannabis businesses across North America, as well as potentially tens of thousands of industry employees.

Many financial institutions are simply too conservative or are unwilling to conduct the thorough due diligence required to keep them from running afoul of federal regulations.

But when an existing member approached O Bee Credit Union in 2014 about opening an account for a newly formed cannabis business in Washington, Jennifer Roberts wanted to figure out some way to make it work.

"Any time a member makes a request of us as a credit union, we always feel like it's our duty to do our best to see if we can say yes," says Roberts, the credit union's chief operating officer.

Before Washington legalized cannabis for recreational use, O Bee provided services to a small handful of medical marijuana businesses, but the publication of the 2013 Cole Memo and Washington's shift to an adult-use market meant a change in policy and moving into uncharted territory — as well as significant risks if members broke the rules.

Thanks in part to Washington's strict guidelines for issuing licenses to prospective cannabis businesses, Roberts was able to develop a compliance program that satisfied O Bee board members' concerns and placated federal regulators. In July 2014, O Bee became the first financial institution in Washington to serve all three cannabis license types — producers, processors and retailers — and one of the first credit unions in the country to openly work with the regulated marijuana industry.

O Bee launched its pilot program with a goal of signing at least 20 businesses. The credit union surpassed that objective within 90 days and had nearly 200 cannabis clients within the first 12 months.

"At that one-year mark, I was able to erase 'pilot program' from our internal documents and it's been a fully formalized program ever since," Roberts says.

Today, O Bee's cannabis program remains a benchmark for how financial institutions can work with marijuana-related clients. The credit union provides full-service deposit services, online banking and payroll options to Washington cannabis businesses and their employees, who are often barred from mainstream banks the same way businesses and their owners are.

"We've spent 10 years proving this is possible," Roberts says. "And not only is it possible, it is making for a better experience for business owners who are able to expand their own businesses and locations and services, and as a banking industry, we're making it happen and we're not having any problems."

The development of O Bee's cannabis program has mirrored the credit union's overall growth since Roberts joined the organization as the assistant to the CEO in 2006, when O Bee had just two branches and 36 employees. Today, O Bee has seven branches, 155 employees and more than 34,000 members — and Roberts has worked nearly every position in the company, rising to the level of chief operating officer.

O Bee Credit Union was founded more than six decades ago to serve employees of Olympia Brewing Company, who, similar to today's cannabis workers, were discriminated against by banks.

"It was almost the same exact vibe as today," Roberts says. "So we're just continuing this tradition of serving the underserved. One of the things I love about O Bee is that it's always stayed true to credit union values of people serving people and not being about profit."

# Katrina MCKINLEY

**10 YEARS AT NO. 1 |** At the helm of the most successful cannabis production company in Washington, Katrina McKinley is continuously pushing Grow Op Farms to new heights. Under her leadership the company has maintained its No. 1 spot in Washington while also expanding into Massachusetts and California. She's aiming to bring the company to all U.S. markets.

In addition to being the largest cannabis company in Washington state, Grow Op Farms has successfully expanded into California and Massachusetts as vertically integrated operators, growing the company's portfolio to six production facilities, six retail stores and an estimated 750 employees in the three states — thanks, in part, to the leadership of CEO and co-founder Katrina McKinley.

"We are aggressive and innovative in our business approach," McKinley says. "We strive to be a staple on the shelf of every cannabis retail store."

Grow Op Farms plans to continue expanding across the country, but its success starts in its home state of Washington, where the company's Phat Panda brand is arguably the most recognized cannabis brand in the state. According to state resources, Grow Op Farms has, with rare exception, consistently outsold every competitor since the company's inception more than 10 years ago.

McKinley co-founded the business with her husband, Rob McKinley, in 2013, after the couple found success with a smoke shop they co-owned with some friends.

"When the state started accepting applicants for licenses, they called us and encouraged us to apply and get into the business," she says. "Of course we had



some apprehension, but we were also very excited to get started in a completely new market."

But McKinley and her husband both had prior experience running their own traditional businesses and entered the new market with the advantage of knowing how a business — even a cannabis business — should operate.

Within six months Grow Op Farms took the No. 3 spot in terms of revenue for Washington cannabis businesses. Within one year of its launch, the company hit \$946,000 in sales, more than the next two companies combined.

McKinley says the company's Phat Panda branding

and marketing helped the brand stand out to customers, but the quality of the products was what kept them coming back for more.

With sales exploding shortly after the company's debut in 2014, McKinley realized the farm's Tier III license, which allowed up to 30,000 square feet of grow space, wouldn't be enough to meet market demands. The company rapidly expanded from its initial licensing limitations into more than 200,000 square feet of dedicated cultivation and processing space split among the company's three licenses.

Capturing and holding that No. 1 spot in Washington for nearly 10 years is, with understandable reason, the

company's biggest milestone to date. However, McKinley says she aims to continue the company's growth in its current markets and beyond.

"Our next goal would be continuing to increase brand awareness and getting our products into all legal states for consumers to enjoy," she says.

When asked about the pressure of maintaining the No. 1 spot in Washington for more than a decade, McKinley expressed little anxiety about the company's spotlight, plainly stating: "Our primary focus is on making our products and company the best it can be," she says. "We are always looking for ways to improve to maintain our No. 1 spot in the state."

# Krista HEINZ

## CHAMPION FOR CHANGE

One of Washington's first medical cannabis patients, Krista Heinz brings a wealth of industry experience and draws upon her extensive knowledge to help lead 1937 Farms to new heights. In her time with 1937 Farms, Heinz has helped the company more than double its retail footprint.



her for help with his recreational grow.

"So I got into it and realized that there are some really good farms out there that are doing really good work," she says. "And was like, all right, I don't want to work in the medical field anymore, and then kind of dove headfirst into cannabis."

Heinz already more than a decade of experience growing cannabis, but she became something of an artisanal specialist and quickly learned the recreational market's legal processes from seed to sale, as well as how to apply her existing knowledge to a commercial operation. Although dedicated to the industry, Heinz says she struggled to find a home until she applied for a position at 1937 Farms.

"Now, thankfully, I just have amazing bosses," Heinz says. "I finally found a farm that grows the way I do — not for quantity, but for quality. You know, real quality medicine."

Heinz joined 1937 Farms as a packaging and production associate in July 2023 and has since worked her way to become the company's production and sales manager. She took over sales management for the company about six months ago and has more than doubled the farm's retail footprint. The sudden surge in demand has pushed the company to expand its grow capacity from one greenhouse to five, albeit slowly.

"We're going to start with the first three [greenhouses], because we want to increase our employee numbers as little as possible," she says. "My job is to make sure that our crew is as strong as it possibly can be, so that when we do start to ramp up, we can add new key players."

Krista Heinz, the production and sales manager for the Washington cannabis producer 1937 Farms, began her relationship with legal cannabis at age 14, as one of the first medical marijuana patients in the state.

Heinz, now a three-time cancer survivor, picked up her first prescription for medical cannabis with her mom inside "a little basement area" at the University of Washington. It was the early 2000s, in the early days of Washington's medical cannabis era, when dispensaries weren't common yet.

"They wouldn't let me smoke weed at Children's Hospital, but I wasn't allowed to leave the campus," she says, "so somebody from our church donated an RV, and my mom and I would just post up in the RV in the parking lot of Children's Hospital and watch X-Files and smoke."

Her initial cannabis prescription only came after doctors tried every medication they could to get her to eat. Heinz says it saved her life and made her a huge proponent of legalization. As soon as she legally could, she was growing for herself until Washington replaced the medical program with recreational cannabis in 2014.

Heinz, who was working as an urgent-care nurse at the time, initially boycotted the recreational market out of principle, until a friend she knew from her time in the medical market asked

# Ariel SANCHEZ

## EXPANDING HORIZONS

Kush21 chief operating officer Ariel Sanchez's leadership transcends routine operational management, cultivating a culture rich in ambition and professional growth. Her role at Kush21 is not merely about leadership and strategy; it positions her as a key figure in the company's continuing success story and its future.



Ariel Sanchez's rise in the cannabis industry is marked by unyielding ambition and insightful leadership. Her story commenced in late 2014 with Greenside Recreational in Des Moines, Washington. From the beginning, she was thoroughly engaged in every facet of the business, particularly handling marketing for Greenside. Her drive to influence the industry motivated her to earn an Associate of Arts in Business Management, skillfully integrating her hands-on experience with academic learning to advance her professional path.

"It significantly broadened my perspective on establishing structure within the cannabis industry," Ariel says. "My aim was to enhance our time management and leadership skills, improve communication, and foster stronger connections between employees and management as a team."

By 2021, Sanchez had become part of the Kush21 team as a marketing manager, navigating the complex post-COVID-19 environment while also embracing the challenges of new motherhood.

Her skilled leadership soon shone through, leading to her rapid promotion to chief operations officer. In this capacity, she has catalyzed significant growth and heightened operational efficiencies at all Kush21 locations. She led the formation of a robust e-commerce team, ventured into MSO accounts in Illinois and Missouri, launched a craft grow operation in Illi-

nois and oversaw the opening of several new locations, each underscoring her innovative and adaptive approach.

"As a team, we assisted in acquiring new locations and developed their SOPs, ensuring everyone understood their roles," she explains. "Together, we now manage 12 locations in Washington, one in Illinois and one in Missouri."

Sanchez's influence extends beyond business performance; she has transformed the workplace into a dynamic center for growth and education. By deploying effective systems, she has notably enhanced operational efficiency, establishing new benchmarks for the company.

"When I first started, we had about 175 employees," she notes. "After merging with new shops and expanding our locations, we're approaching the 400-employee mark now."

Working in close collaboration with Kush21 CEO Michale Beraki, a mentor and respected leader, Sanchez has been instrumental in developing Kush21 into an MSO that genuinely embodies the company's mission. Her leadership transcends routine operational management, cultivating a culture rich in ambition and professional growth. Sanchez's role at Kush21 is not merely about leadership and strategy; it positions her as a key figure in the company's continuing success story and its future achievements.

"It's a privilege to lead a team that is so in tune with our vision and committed to our collective goals," she says. "We are incredibly fortunate to have strong leadership supporting the Kush21 vision, with dedicated backing from Michale Beraki, Daniel Beraki and Woldu Beraki as we work towards achieving our long-term goals."

*When everyone  
was going right,  
we went left.*



## Wendy HULL

### TRAILBLAZING LEADER

**Fairwinds CEO Wendy Hull has piloted her trailblazing cannabis business through Washington's tumultuous industry by anticipating production trends and then doing the opposite. Her business flourished at the onset of recreational sales by dedicating products to the state's medical patients who were essentially abandoned by regulators.**

Fairwinds CEO Wendy Hull based the company's name on a nautical term sailors used more than a century ago, because it succinctly captured excitement and anxiety of launching a licensed cannabis business in 2014.

"It's a term they used to say when sailors would leave — like, 'May the wind be at your back and give you smooth sailing,'" Hull says. "We thought it was going to be fitting because it was a brand-new industry."

Despite the name invoking hopes and prayers, Hull wasn't going to leave anything to chance. As all of Washington's licensed producers were forced into recreational sales, Hull set out to make Fairwinds the definitive, high-quality medical brand.

"When everybody was going right, we went left," she says. "We focused on doing something that nobody else did at the time and it was so easy back in early 2015 to get in the stores, because everybody was dropping off samples of flower and we were dropping off samples of tinctures and topicals."

It wasn't until 2020 that the company decided to diversify and focus on flower with the launch of its Passion Flower product line. While the product line has injected new life into the company, Hull assures brand loyalists that Fairwinds hasn't abandoned its medical roots and a new ailment-focused product is set to debut in early 2025. Fairwinds also produces a CBD line, Vitality Naturals, which has opened the door for the company to do white-labeling for businesses in Canada, Costa Rica and Brazil.

"That's really ended up turning into its own successful company, in a lot of ways, more successful than Fairwinds under 502, because we have a larger audience," Hull says.

Prior to launching Fairwinds, Hull worked in security for the federal government for 26 years. The animosity of leaving a federal position to work in a federally illegal field motivated her to help change perceptions about cannabis. She says it seemed odd at the time that most of her peers would take nearly any prescription medications without much hesitation and yet, something as simple as a plant would raise so many eyebrows.

"But once I left, I never looked back, and I never once thought I would fail. It never crossed my mind," Hull says. "What honestly made it so exciting was that not very often do you get an opportunity to get in on the ground floor and really shape an industry and help shape the perception of an industry."

After more than 10 years of working in Washington's tumultuous cannabis market, Hull has watched as perceptions changed about the plant and industry. The company once struggled to find vendors for even simple branding merchandise, but is now screening calls from solicitors looking to book them as clients. In hindsight, Hull says her biggest success in the industry, aside from surviving, is taking an approach that built a brand people trust.

"It makes me feel like we made good decisions early on and built that foundation of trust," she says. "To me, that is probably still the biggest accomplishment — that trust from consumers."



*It's really  
all about  
storytelling.*

# Aubrey WILDE

**KOSMIK REIMAGINED | Fashion industry transplant Aubrey Wilde is expanding the consumer base for the Midwestern multi-state operator Kosmik Brands as its vice president of marketing. Wilde's presence has led to a refresh for the brand and its social media, maintaining the company's core identity while expanding to reach a larger demographic.**

Working for a Midwest-based multi-state cannabis brand might seem worlds apart from the East Coast fashion industry, but Aubrey Wilde says “marketing is marketing at the end of the day.”

“It’s really all about storytelling, and it’s about finding a way we can connect to our buyers,” says the vice president of marketing for Kosmik Brands. “How are we going to create the story of Kosmik Brands and make it really feel more like a lifestyle brand that connects with our patients and consumers?”

One of the biggest challenges with cannabis — and a difference from most other industries — is the level of compliance required, particularly when operating in multiple states.

“Each market is so different in terms of packaging, in terms of labeling, in terms of advertising,” Wilde says.

“In one state you can advertise on billboards, in another state you can’t. Having social media is great, but it’s also really challenging because of the rules and regulations. One day you post something and it’s fine; the next day you post the same thing

and you’re flagged.”

Early in her career with Kosmik, a regulatory change forced the company to completely overhaul its packaging in Missouri. To this day, it’s still one of the biggest undertakings she’s had with the company.

“I was like, ‘Wow, we’re just jumping right in,’” she says.

Wilde joined Kosmik in early 2023, then took over as vice president of marketing that fall, working on projects that range from merchandising, packaging, apparel and social media to creating in-store displays and redesigning the company’s website.

Kosmik was founded in Oklahoma in 2019 and has become one of the fastest growing edibles brands in the country.

The company now has a footprint in seven states, with more on the horizon, and is exploring new formulations and products to stay at the forefront of the industry.

“When I came on board, the company was really focused on high dosage, which is what we’ve always been known for, but we want to have the ability to go into different markets like micro-dose products and things like that,” Wilde says.

That evolution has led to a refresh for the brand and its social media presence, maintaining its core identity while expanding to reach a larger demographic.

As a creative person herself, Wilde says she enjoys working with a company full of “amazing and creative” people who help push Kosmik and the entire industry forward.

“One thing Kosmik Brands is really good at is knowing their consumer and listening to feedback,” she says. “Being involved in packaging design and the overall creative direction of what a new product line is going to look like is something I really love.”

“I definitely see us expanding into more states in 2025 and hopefully internationally, as well, as legalization continues to expand. I also think the stigma behind the industry is slowly dissipating, which I think is awesome.”



*We should all be rowing  
in the same boat,  
winning together.*

# Meg SANDERS

**TRENDSETTER | With more than 15 years of leadership experience in the cannabis industry, Canna Provisions CEO Meg Sanders has not only survived in the ultra-competitive market, she's led businesses to thrive by courting the often-overlooked female audience with engaging, fun products and a genuine care for the consumer.**

Canna Provisions CEO Meg Sanders has a proven track record of thriving in incredibly volatile and competitive markets. From her entry into the industry as one of the early operators in Colorado's medical cannabis program to piloting her former cannabis chain through its ultra-competitive adult-use cannabis market and then helping usher in recreational cannabis in Massachusetts with her second vertically integrated operation, Sanders has shown a knack for reading a room and connecting with her core audience.

"At the end of the day, we are CPG," she says. "And who makes the buying decisions in our country? Women. They control the purse strings, and our data shows it."

Courting a female audience is about creating a fun environment Sanders says, where the shopping experience and products become linked in the consumers' minds. The pink grinders, strain-themed nail polish and kitty-cat rolling trays not only add to the theme, but also make for great upsells, as Sanders points out that Canna Provisions stores see an average of three or more items per transaction at the register. More importantly, they help the chain stand out in Massachusetts' crowded and

competitive market.

"There is no such thing as a competitor if you are telling your story correctly," she says. "As long as it's authentic from the moment they pull in the parking lot to the moment they get back in their car, then you have a solid retail footprint; that's no easy task in today's market."

Standing out is paramount for Canna Provisions because retailers are limited to just three locations and the state's free-market approach to licensing, where there simply is no cap, sees new retailers and producers enter the crowded marketplace regularly. The competition, limitations and free-market in Massachusetts compelled Sanders to structure Canna Provisions to rely more on third-party vendors and use the in-house production for its flower and pre-rolls. The structure ensures the stores are ready and able to pivot and meet consumer demands which can often mean offering "something new every time they come in," she says.

"That always-have-something-new mentality drive stores," Sanders says. "I think if you want to be successful in this market, you definitely need to have a good variety of product moving through your store and I can certainly tell you that we crank through it."

Another differentiator Sanders points to is that Canna Provisions is an employee-owned company which encourages employees to consider the company's bottom line and think critically about operations on every level, because they actually have a stake in its success.

"We should all be rowing in the same boat, winning together, and it aligned us very much in that way," she says.

After having spent more than 15 years in the industry and seeing the consolidation, cutthroat pricing and countless businesses come and go, Sanders says she'd never trade the progress the industry has made for the much simpler market she entered in 2009.

"Back then, maybe what 10% of the population actively said that they consume cannabis," she says. "I have a much bigger audience now which makes this very exciting consumer good and if you can tell the story right and provide an excellent experience, then I think you have what it takes to make it."

*Nobody appreciated the gold rush atmosphere that would ensue.*

## Sarah Lee GOSSETT PARRISH

### AWARD-WINNING LAWYER

**While some lament Oklahoma's medical cannabis system, it's given attorney Sarah Lee Gossett Parrish a good reason to fight for three things she's passionate about: individual freedoms, states rights and free enterprise.**

Attorney Sarah Lee Gossett Parrish has now been focused on cannabis law in Oklahoma for about six years, and she's still as passionate and committed to fighting for her clients as ever.

"I'm a firm believer in individual freedoms, and for the government to say a plant that is not harmful can't be consumed is like waving a red flag in front of a bull for me," she says. "I'm a real states rights person, and I do feel like the Feds need to stay out of things and let the states handle it as much as possible. But I also think it is really nonsensical and irrational for the Feds to continue to list marijuana in the Controlled Substances Act as a harmful drug with heroin. It's crazy. That still motivates me to try to help the industry."

Parrish was one of the first attorneys in Oklahoma to focus on the legal cannabis industry, following the state's passage of Question 788 in 2018, which legalized medical marijuana, established guidelines for a regulated market and opened the floodgates.

"Nobody appreciated the gold rush atmosphere that would ensue," she says. "I don't think anybody understood how big it was going to be and how many applicants there would be and the manpower

that would be required to process and implement everything."

Shifting her attention to cannabis was a natural fit for Parrish, who has won numerous awards in her 36-year legal career. She had previously handled a variety of real estate, compliance, mergers and acquisitions, business formation and insurance-related issues — all skills that dovetailed well with the nascent cannabis space.

Although the Oklahoma market is slowly settling into a normalized industry, there are still nearly 2,000 dispensaries with active licenses and more than 3,400 growers in a state with only 4 million residents.

Many people joke that there's now a dispensary on every corner in Oklahoma — and they might be right — but Parrish believes one of the best things Oklahoma did was start with a low barrier to entry, giving businesses of all sizes the opportunity to get into the game, with a license fee of only \$2,500. It's really the only free-enterprise medical cannabis system in the country. And the laws of supply and demand and basic economics will ultimately determine which businesses survive and which ones go under.

"I know there are people who disagree with me on that, but when you start limiting licenses, you're starting to put roadblocks in the way of people who want to enter the industry, and I am just a big believer in the free enterprise system."

Another thing Oklahoma did right, in Parrish's eyes, is not having a list of qualifying conditions required for people to get a medical card. As long as patients receive a recommendation from a doctor, they are eligible for the state's medical cannabis program.

"I feel like our system is imperfect, but I'd sure take it over a lot of the other states that are out there," she says.

That's not to say the industry as a whole has seen smooth sailing.

"Here in Oklahoma, it continues to be the Wild, Wild West," Parrish says. "You just never know what's coming around the corner, but I really enjoy working with my clients and I'm very protective of them. God sends me the best clients on the planet. They're great people, and I have a passion for helping them survive as courageous entrepreneurs in this industry."



# Kayla WEED

**STORYTELLER** | Marketing manager Kayla Weed has now worked with three major multistate operators, giving her a wide range of experience and the ability to wear multiple hats for her current company, Story.



Kayla Weed has seen a lot of rapid changes in the past four years, even by cannabis industry standards.

The 31-year-old senior marketing manager joined the industry in 2020 as a marketing coordinator for Harvest Health & Recreation during the company's meteoric rise and eventual \$2.1 billion acquisition by Trulieve in 2021, before leaving Trulieve to join Story Cannabis alongside several of her former Harvest peers.

"The people that came over here to Story, we certainly didn't come over here to have less stressful lives," Weed says. "It's a startup and that's way more stress, but it was really to have a seat at the table and build it into something that we're all really proud of."

Weed started at Story Cannabis in 2023 and has helped the company launch its Just Flower and Fade Co brands along with the usual bevy of responsibilities inherent with startup companies.

"I used to joke, 'What hat am I wearing today? Do you need the digital marketing manager, the brand manager, retail manager, the customer service manager?'" she says. "I have been pretty good at being the organized person, because when you have a lot going on, you have to organize yourself, prioritize what hat you're wearing to be able to produce to the standard that I like producing."

"You have to set the bar high for yourself."

Story Cannabis has grown considerably since Weed first

joined. In Arizona, where the company is headquartered, Story has expanded from three locations to 11 in a little more than a year. It's a similar trajectory to what Harvest had during its heyday, but Weed says the company is not looking to repeat history.

She says Story CEO Jason Vedadi and chief operations officer Joe Sai have held firm in the approach of keeping Story a private company.

"There's no fear that we are going to be something else next year," she says. "None of us have that feeling."

Prior to joining the cannabis industry, Weed spent eight years working in pharmaceuticals.

While she jokingly says she "went from one drug to the next," Weed quickly grew to hate the pharmaceutical industry for the ways it would gatekeep patients from vital medications and at the same time over-prescribe harmful, unnecessary ones.

Though she describes her past career with noticeable acrimony, she says it gave her firsthand experience in working with highly regulated substances and government agencies.

For the majority of her life, Weed had been a regular consumer of cannabis, but never saw it as a potential career. But when she came across a post for a marketing position at Harvest, her distaste for the pharmaceutical industry's harmful practices only fueled her passion to be a part of booming new legal industry.

"I could not believe it," she says. "Hold the phone, you're telling me I could be doing marketing for cannabis? I never wanted something more in my life."

# Christina BETANCOURT JOHNSON

**CAPTAIN OF THE SHIP** | After years and years "on the ocean," Christina Betancourt Johnson can finally see dry land: Standard Wellness Maryland will receive two licenses this fall and Johnson will be able to focus on operations.



Christina Betancourt Johnson is finally so close to seeing the rewards of a journey that started almost seven years ago and has, through years of attempting to break into Maryland's cannabis market, required not just a boatload of hard work and know-how, but also an endless supply of persistence, creativity and determination.

"I would say this process is probably equivalent in many ways to someone trying to chart a small vessel, like a three- or four-person vessel across the world," she explains. "The reality is that like navigating a boat, there are an incredible number of variables and unknowns that you have no control over as the boat captain, and they range in scope and severity from the weather to the materials on the boat not being as sustainable as you thought they were."

Johnson is the CEO of Standard Wellness Maryland, a company that was incorporated in 2019 and first sought licensure under Maryland's medical cannabis program, but, among several starts and stops the enterprise has endured, had to shift gears to operate within the state's adult-use market, following a successful legalization initiative on the 2022 ballot. After years of fundraising, applications, litigation and the necessary work to operationalize the business, Standard Wellness will finally have its first two

licenses up and running this fall (cultivation first, with a retail shop possibly opening before the end of October, followed by plans for manufacturing around summer 2025). Standard Wellness will be Maryland's first social equity licensees.

"I would say we're still on the ocean, but we're getting really close to land and I'm tired of the journey," Johnson jokes.

Prior to undertaking her cannabis business journey, Johnson was the CEO of a nonprofit and also worked in commercial real estate development, experiences that have proven invaluable to working in an industry as challenging and unpredictable as cannabis.

"I learned as an executive in that space that every deal dies at least once before it can live," she says. "And I think that's really important because as a cannabis entrepreneur, who is trying to build this new venture and sell it to people who are willing to invest in it, you've got to understand that deals will die before they live, and you've got to have agility when navigating the fundraising space and the operations space, and you also have to have a resilience that, quite frankly, is impenetrable."

Johnson has also served on the board of directors for the U.S. Cannabis Council and the National Hispanic Cannabis Council and was appointed vice chair of Maryland Governor Wes Moore's cannabis advisory board — all while running her own company, doing some nonprofit work and being a mother to a teenage daughter.

"My hope is that I've got a pretty successful and long run in this industry," she says. "I hope my daughter one day can look up to me and be proud of me, or even say, 'Hey, I want to get in the sector with my mom.' That would be the ultimate testimony of this journey. It's legacy."



From left to right: Wana Brands CFO Sandy Li; founder and former CEO Nancy Whiteman; and COO Kelly Flores.

Sandy  
LI

Kelly  
FLORES

**NEW ERA FOR WANA | With founder Nancy Whiteman no longer in charge as the Wana Brands CEO, new leaders like CFO Sandy Li and COO Kelly Flores are filling the void to keep the successful cannabis brand's culture intact.**

Wana Brands has long been among the most prolific cannabis companies in the industry. The Colorado-based company was founded in 2010, during the state's medical marijuana program, and has grown to become one of the very few international cannabis enterprises, with operations across North America and most recently into Europe.

With founder Nancy Whiteman at the helm for well over a decade, Wana could easily be considered the top woman-led business in the cannabis industry since the early days of adult-use legalization.

"I think what I've appreciated about Nancy's leadership style is that she appreciates individuality and values everybody's opinion, regardless of your background or your role," says Wana Brands chief operating officer Kelly Flores. "It's a natural fit for a leadership team. ... We don't always agree, but it's definitely an environment that is safe to say what you need to say."

Whiteman stepped down from her day-to-day leadership of the company at the end of May 2024, though she will continue to play an active role with the Wana Brands Foundation, a nonprofit she launched in 2022.

Also in May, Canadian cannabis giant Canopy Growth confirmed that it will acquire Wana Brands in a deal that was three years in the making and included a \$297.5 million up-front payment to Wana Brands in 2021.

As Whiteman stepped away from her role as CEO, the question of what will happen to the company's

culture and what the potential void of female leadership would mean for the industry loomed at the end of spring. However, while Joe Hodas stepped into the role as CEO, most of the company's leadership positions are still held by women who help maintain the legacy Whiteman started.

"The reason Wana became Wana was because of her," says Wana Brands chief financial officer Sandy Li. "She built that culture. She carried that flag to where we are today. The culture was from her, but it is a collective from the team. We are going to continue to build the culture."

Li describes the former CEO as a "legend in cannabis" and "the best leader to build leaders." She conveys a sense of pride in becoming part of the company's culture and helping it live on under its new parent company, Canopy USA, and new leadership.

"We are all working on strategy, but any strategy takes time," she says. "It takes time to figure out what we want to be, but at the same time to figure out implementation, to monitor the results, it takes time to really integrate all the teams to work together."

Li already had a great deal of academic and executive experience prior to joining Wana. She holds an MBA from the University of Chicago Booth School of Business and a master's degree in finance from Southwestern University of Finance and Economics.

She started her career as the co-founder and president of a tech supply chain company, growing it from nothing into one of the largest distributors in Southwest China. After six years, Li sold the company and moved to North America, where she spent nearly 20 years working in finance for a variety of traditional companies. Around 2020, she started seeing more and more sophisticated business leaders enter the cannabis space. As a self-described lifetime learner, she decided to join the industry as vice president of financial planning analysis and treasury for the multi-state operator Parallel in 2020.

"My earlier entrepreneurship helped me really well, because in cannabis you have got to make changes, you've got to be adaptable," Li says. "Cannabis is a challenging world and that's why a lot of people don't want to get involved, but challenges always come with opportunity and rewards to grow professionally and personally."

But knowing there's something new every day makes the cannabis industry exciting, she says. One example would be Canopy's venture into the European cannabis market through a partnership in Switzerland.

"Globalization is, at some point, going to require joint efforts," she says. "We want to go there, and

*The reason Wana became Wana was because of her (founder Nancy Whiteman).*

we want to have early entry."

Flores echoes Li's sentiment about the company's partnership in Europe, describing it as similar to a highly choreographed dance between timing, regulations and market potential.

"It's about being there quick, but not too quick, because it's going to take quite a bit of investment to be in some of these markets," Flores says. "We're staying really close to the regulations in each of these different markets, figuring out the best supply chain in the background."

Flores has more than 20 years of experience as a CPG executive with cannabis brands Wana and Dosist, as well as traditional CPG companies like Monster and Nestle. The execution of Wana's European launch may seem like a daunting task, but Flores says it was the challenges inherent to cannabis that brought her to the industry in the first place. She had worked for massive companies in the past and had launched products all over the world, but wanted to use her vast experience to do that with a different type of regulated product.

"Cannabis felt like a natural fit," she says.

Flores joined Wana Brands in 2022 and oversees the company's back-office support systems, in-house manufacturing operations and sourcing. She also heads the team that decides which international markets make financial sense for the company. Flores says the invigorating part of her position is its open-ended solutions; there was already a map for entering new international markets in traditional CPG, but in cannabis "as long as it's legal, there's nothing off the table."

"It's always trying to organize chaos," Flores says. "The thought and the creativity to the solutions that the team comes up with, it's incredible. There's so much flexibility in this industry."

*Cannabis afforded me the ability to think big again.*



## Kim PRINCE

**PR PRO | Proven Media recently celebrated its 10-year anniversary as a cannabis-focused public relations and marketing firm. Although founder Kim Prince came from traditional media and traditional industries, her company has thrived in the rapidly evolving world that connects cannabis with all forms of print, digital and social communications.**

Before founding Proven Media more than a decade ago, there were times when Kim Prince felt like her career wasn't heading the direction she wanted. The work had begun to feel "small."

Getting started in the cannabis space changed all that.

"Cannabis afforded me the ability to think big again," she says.

Prince founded Proven Media in 2014 as one of the first PR agencies dedicated to the emerging cannabis industry, leaning on a simple philosophy of treating everyone well, from members of the media to clients and staff.

"We don't need to step on anyone to get to the top," she says. "I'd rather come in second or third and be known for an amazing company that had great values and treated people well than be the number one company where we had to claw to get there and push people down so we could get up."

Since the company's launch, she's worked with pioneers and entrepreneurs, legacy media brands and startups, world leaders and cultural icons. She's had a front-row seat as the cannabis industry has exploded into a multibillion-dollar industry and as

the media business has evolved rapidly to keep up with our fast-paced digital world. Prince hosted her first Meet the Cannabis Press event in 2015 and has continued to bring journalists and media members together with marketing and communications professionals for regular in-person and virtual events — one of her favorite accomplishments in cannabis. Proven Media also recently launched its influencer division called Industry Blazers in response to the converging worlds of social media and traditional media.

"We're just real people trying to connect with real people to make good things happen," Prince says. "The methods of communication may be changing and evolving. The toolbox is changing but the messaging still needs to take place. We like to remind our clients that communication will never go out of style."

For Prince, working in this industry has the added social value of helping shift the public perception surrounding cannabis. It's about normalizing cannabis, removing the longstanding stigmas associated with the plant and persuading people who are anti-cannabis to open their minds a little more and reconsider preconceived notions.

And it's personal. Earlier in her career, she was recruited to handle PR for several high-tech companies, but there was a catch: many of them required pre-employment drug screening.

"I definitely paid a price for loving cannabis," she says. "That's part of the reason I ended up in my own business. It forced me to pivot and do my own thing, and it turned out to be, for lack of a better word, a blessing in disguise."

When she saw the opportunity to combine her education and her experience with her passion, she leapt at it and never looked back.

"They say follow your passion," she says. "When I had the agency, I had some great clients; we had a chef who was a James Beard finalist, and we had Ace Hardware stores, but I could never get passionate about a can of paint. ... For me, cannabis — not only the plant, but the word — has completely opened up my world again."