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HOST: LIVING ROOMS is our new digital series looking at the transformation in where and how we live. Read, listen, and watch at [thewalrus.ca/livingrooms](http://thewalrus.ca/livingrooms).

It wasn't that long ago that cannabis was illegal in Canada. To many detractors, it was seen as a drug that promotes laziness and was more popular among youth rather than a legitimate medicine that can reduce suffering.

But tens of thousands of Canadians have regained their ability to function because of medical marijuana. People who were once bedridden are now going outside, playing with their kids, and sleeping at night.

So called "NORMAL" activities are made possible again through legal use of medical marijuana.

Welcome to The Conversation Piece.

This is Hilary Black, Chief Advocacy Officer at Canopy Growth.

HILARY BLACK: Good evening. My name is Hilary black and I am the founder of the first medical organisation in the country - the BC compassion club society, and it was founded 22 years ago. I am currently the director of Patient Education advocacy for Canopy Growth. And I have spent pretty much every day of my life since I was 18 working to break down barriers for patients to access cannabis and working to free cannabis from the chains that bind her. And as we stand on the precipice of this monumental moment in history, I believe that we need to understand where we have come from in order to see really clearly where we're going.

Cannabis has been prohibited in Canada for 95 years, five months and 24 days. And tomorrow that all changes and this reform movement - part of what gave it so much power. It was accelerated in the late nineties by patients and by patients' needs. Back then in Vancouver, where I'm from, there is an epidemic of HIV transmission rates. Literally it was a health crisis. And back then the side effects of the medications for HIV were as likely to kill you as the disease was, there was a flood of patients seeking medical cannabis and seeking information about it. I started delivering cannabis to patients when I was 19 with a bicycle, and me and my mountain equipment backpack, and my Motorola pager were desperately trying to curb an avalanche of unnecessary suffering and even death.

There was a group of politically active gay men with HIV who wrapped themselves around me and said, "you go girl, if they try to arrest you, we are going to chain ourselves to you. And we're going to hunger strike." And with that boost of courage, the compassion club was born. Uh, there was, uh, in 1997 May 1st in fact, there was a small group of young women, my friends who were willing to break the law and risk arrest and be in service to patients that were often living in poverty and had multiple diagnoses and had substance use issues.

We were inspired and motivated by patients like Greg Cooper who had severe MS. And without cannabis, he literally couldn't speak or feed himself or put his pants on or go to the bathroom by himself and with cannabis, he could do all of those things. It's about a year in, this brilliant woman. Jasmine came along and checked out my project and said, "Oh, this is a great idea. I love what you're doing. How about we take all of your profits and spend all the money, providing



natural health care to people who are in poverty?” And I was like, that sounds like a great idea. So, that's exactly what we did. And we built a wellness centre and we took all of the profits from the cannabis distribution, and we hired doctors of traditional Chinese medicine and naturopaths and herbalists and counsellors. And we provided access to those services in conjunction with the cannabis therapies.

And we saw tremendous healing and lives were transformed. And that wellness centre was the spoonful of sugar that helped the medicine go down. Cannabis became a gateway herb into health and healing, the wellness centre and our commitment to patients earned us support of physicians, of the police, of the city, the press, even David Suzuki. The courts and the Senate. Thank you to Senator Pierre Claude Nolin, may he rest in peace. He would be so proud to see this day and deserves a tremendous amount of credit. And that was the beginning of the acceptance of cannabis as a legitimate medicine.

So, when I was growing up, my grandpa, Paul McLaughlin, who is a decorated war hero, he taught me that as a Canadian, we stand up for the underdog; that we fight for universal access to healthcare. And we correct social justice issues. He taught me that Canadians are brave and that we are kind, and the work of the compassion club was based in those values.

So, now 22 years later, there are 330, maybe 350,000 patients who have legal access to cannabis. So that's 330,000 lives just in the legal system that have been transformed. Patients with conditions like chronic pain or cancer or arthritis or insomnia. These are people who now can eat. Their breakfast, can pick up their children, can sleep through the night and maybe they're even getting off their prescription medications like their opiates. They're able to live their lives. So, at Canopy, we work with 85,000 or with one in four of the patients in the legal system. And we did a survey to ask them about how cannabis was affecting their life. And the number one thing that they told us was the cannabis allowed them to go outside, to be able to go outside, imagine that living a life where you feel like you can't go outside and then suddenly you can.

In my work with Canopy, one of the things I do is manage our social responsibility initiatives. And in those initiatives, we strive to respect the roots of the compassion club and to carry that legacy forward. 22 years ago, it was an HIV epidemic that this country was facing. And today Canada's health crisis is an opioid overdose epidemic. The Canopy initiative that I am the most proud of was born out of this crisis. Last year, my best friend's daughter, LaRue Higgins - she died of a fentanyl overdose at the age of 18. And Gemma was a talented DJ and a brilliant artist and a sweet, sensitive soul. And more than anything, she loved her dog.

Gemma could be the daughter of any one of us. And she is another casualty really of the war on drugs. After she died, I took quite a bit of time off to support the family. And when I came back to work, my team at Canopy said, “what do you want to do, Hil, what do you want to do?” And we recognised that the country was facing a significant health crisis. There was a lack of leadership and a lack of funding. And so me and my team, we stepped up. So, we've donated two and a half million dollars to the University of British Columbia to create an endowment that is going to support the world's first ever professorship of cannabis science

And that professorship is going to be focused on studying the role of cannabis as a part of the solution to the opiate epidemic. Then the BC government decided that they were going to put in a half a million dollars because they recognise that cannabis has tremendous potential as a part of that solution. I have faith that the cannabis industry is going to continue to honour its roots



and be the most generous and compassionate and conscious industry in the world. That together we will be the spoonful of sugar that dissolves stigma and dissolves prohibition worldwide.

So, everybody keeps asking me, what's the country going to look like after legalisation? And really, I don't think it's going to be that different, except we won't be jailing peaceful people, and we won't be ruining careers or tearing families apart. And there will be increased access to a product that can really help patients and improves people's lives.

We're going to be able to have more open and pragmatic conversations with youth. We're going to be able to manage the risks around cannabis way better. But the work in Canada, isn't done. Patients need the unjust tax removed and insurance coverage. There are other taxation issues that need to be addressed. The legislation is also unnecessarily restrictive. This is kind of legalisation 1.0. But what I get excited about right now and where I feel a tremendous amount of responsibility is the global impact of repealing prohibition.

The prohibition of cannabis. This is a war on drugs, and this is a war on people and a war on families. And tomorrow is not just the beginning of a new legal industry. Tomorrow is the beginning of the end of that war. I have had a gun held to my head by police for being at a medical cannabis grow. And that's nothing compared to the damage that this war has done and is doing. Crystal Minews is a First Nation woman and a mother of two. And she's serving 15 years in a Texas prison for drawing a map on a napkin, but somebody else used to smuggle cannabis. She had no idea what they were going to use that map for, and her babies are growing up without her because of her conspiracy charges. Bernard Noble is a 49 year old father of seven serving more than 13 years in the U S and he had the equivalency of two joints. And on August 30th of this year in Malaysia, Mohammed Lachman was sentenced to death for providing medical cannabis to severely ill patients.

Canada awarded me a Queen's Diamond Jubilee for doing the exact same work that he got the death sentence for. So, legalisation is not only about the right to get high. This is about human rights, about social justice, and about access to healthcare. This is about bravely standing up for the Gregs and the Crystals and the Bernards and the Muhammad's. You know, cannabis was widely used and accepted and celebrated for thousands of years until prohibition turned it into a tool of oppression and of social injustice.

So right now, Canada is considered the most trusted country in the world. And now we have this incredible opportunity to export our values of freedom, of compassion and fairness. I have the honour of getting to work on the forefront of this movement and industry as this huge legal and cultural shift takes place in Canada and next, around the world. Tomorrow, we can all stand tall, whether you're interested in consuming cannabis or not, and be proud of Canada as we step onto the global stage and use our power and privilege to show meaningful courageous leadership in a time when it's so hard to read the news in a world full of hardship and darkness, I am so inspired and proud that together we're offering the world this beacon of much needed.

Thank you.

HOST: Hilary Black spoke at The Walrus Talks CANNABIS in 2018, and she's just one of the over 800 fantastic Canadians who have walked, wheeled, and web-cammed into the virtual stage at The Walrus Talks.

The Conversation Piece Podcast: **Hilary Black** from The Walrus Talks



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