

WOMEN IN WEED

SHERRY BENNETT TALKS CHRONIC PAIN & MENTAL HEALTH

By Phil Wong



I think it's amazing to see how much the Cannabis industry in Toronto has grown, especially in the equality sense of things. I have seen many different job titles on LinkedIn and have noticed that women are definitely on the move in this industry. Recently, I was at an educational forum on the subject of cannabis, "Medical Marijuana: It's High Time We Learned the Facts!" Wanting to find out more about the promoter and her motivation, I asked Gerald Major, who was one of the panelists, to introduce me to the promoter Sherry Bennett. Today, I am sitting down to chat with Sherry Bennett, who is the Managing Director of Bayview Concierge, and also a Medical Cannabis Advisor to her clients.

Thanks for joining us today Sherry. I was just wondering how did you get into this industry?

Well I'll start by saying that I am a connector. I connect people to the services and resources they need to help them manage the "Logistics of Life". My belief is that we simply cannot get through this life alone and we will all need help from time to time. So, drawing on my own lived experience, I created a business that organizes nursing care, personal support workers, drives to medical appointments and patient advocacy. Over the years, I've had the privilege of managing some unique requests too! This past summer, one of my elder clients asked me to help her get legal access to medical cannabis. So I was kind of curious as I have wanted to try it for some time now. You see for over 20 years, I have

lived with symptoms of P.T.S.D. As I went through the Health Canada process for my client and myself, I quickly

learned that patients face a constellation of obstacles when trying to access their medicine legally. I received my very first bottle of cannabis oil in September and I have found tremendous relief! I have been able to guide many other clients through the maze (and haze) of issues surrounding the landscape of cannabis. It is one more service that I can offer through my company.

That's awesome! So you never really used cannabis before this?

Weed was very accessible to me. In fact, every drug imaginable (legal or otherwise) was accessible to me but at the time, I was simply too afraid. My father was a doctor in the community and his office was repeatedly broken into by people wanting drugs and prescription cough medicine. Some of his patients were intra-venous drug users. A couple of them attended school with me and I remember hearing that they had died by an overdose of "drugs"— usually it was heroin. Both of my parents lumped all "drugs" into the same category and constantly lectured me about how "Marijuana was the gateway drug to serious addiction and death!" I know now that is not true but at the time, I was too afraid to experiment with any drugs.

So now you take what you have learned from these experiences, along with the stigma and you help others?

Yes, by drawing heavily on my own personal experience, and the anecdotal stories of my clients, I am now able to guide others through the process of getting their medicine. I also help them to discover the best coping strategies for their particular needs. This I do by providing information and creating opportunities for patients to connect with others who may be facing similar challenges.

And how has this changed your perspective on things?

My strong belief is that education is crucial and most people are keen to learn more about this highly stigmatized topic. So, I've harnessed the collective knowledge in my network and created a series of panel discussions and seminars to address the many benefits and potential drawbacks of medical cannabis. My goal



is to be of service to massive numbers of people, by helping others gain legal access to medical marijuana, and at the same time, help people overcome the stigma. And by the way, I am no stranger to stigma!

What do you mean by that?

Well, I mentioned that my dad was a doctor and in 1988, he died of AIDS. At that time, and because of the nature of his illness, very few people would come near us. Most were terrified of the possibility of contracting AIDS themselves. We couldn't get nursing care (or doctors) to come to the house. My siblings and I were thrust into the role of palliative caregivers and had to learn how to administer blood transfusions, give morphine injections and change diapers. I had two small babies at the time so my sisters and brothers really took the brunt of it. Fortunately, one of my sisters (a nurse) organized us all to cover the shifts of 24/7 care for our dad. Due to the stigma of his illness, he was not allowed to enter a hospital (even the one that he served as Chief of Staff). My mother had no choice but to keep him at home, the home that my siblings and I grew up in. I remember doing the night shift mostly so my siblings could get some rest. Our grandmother (also a nurse) was alive at the time and she helped us tremendously just by cooking and feeding us. Our dad died about a year and a half after he was diagnosed. My Mother had difficulty finding a funeral home that would accept his body! Can you imagine?

No I could not imagine! Wow that is pretty harsh experience, especially for a mother of two to go through!

Yes. It was a traumatic experience for all, shortly after that, we did palliative care for our grandmother as well. Then our



mother was diagnosed with bone cancer. Once again, my siblings and I found ourselves taking shifts of round-the-clock care, sleeping on hospital floors, eating take-out sandwiches and monitoring vital signs. So, this is the short story, the Readers Digest version, which translates into the fact that my siblings and I did several years of ongoing palliative care.

Is that why you have P.T.S.D.?

That certainly was the start of it. During those years of watching my parents die while raising my children, I became highly anxious and that is when I first started having nightmares and flashbacks. However, I have lived through other, more traumatic events that happened since then. That is when I was formally given a diagnosis of P.T.S.D. Every time I've had to tell that chapter of my life, it further injures me. I get physically ill and feel tired and depressed for days after. So, I choose not to say any more about that for now. Believe it or not, I do feel a sense of privilege to have all this "life experience". I've also tried an assortment of pharmaceuticals to treat my anxiety and depression and could not tolerate any medication whatsoever! For me, the side effects were horrible, even in small doses. Since I began using medical cannabis, for the first time in 20 years, no more nightmares,

no more flashbacks and the cannabis oil has taken the edge off my anxiety. I have felt tremendous relief from my symptoms.

And so what are you taking for your PTSD?

I take a Sativa CBD dominant strain for daytime and an Indica THC dominant strain for sleep.

Just out of curiosity how many Licensed Producers have you tried out?

I'm on the third one now, my experience with all three were quite positive actually. The reason I had to switch was due to supply. The oil that I wanted in the strain that I wanted was either sold out or not available. This happened to several of my clients as well. Unfortunately, under the current cannabis legislation, Licensed Producers cannot keep up with demand.



Contributing writer Phil Wong

So how do you educate others?

Mostly, it's one on one and then I direct people to my educational forums. For example, last January, I organized a patient focused panel discussion called "Medical Cannabis: It's High Time We Learned the Facts!" We were sold out and had to turn people away at the door. There is high interest on this subject and the demographic is interesting. Many seniors were in the audience. We had positive feedback and a great many questions answered.

What can you tell us about your next upcoming event?

The next one is scheduled for April 11th at the Richmond Hill Centre for Performing Arts, It's called: "Medical Cannabis 411: Let's talk about Chronic Pain & Mental Health". This time, I want to include a bit of wisdom surrounding mental health because I see a strong connection between chronic pain and mental health. Most people who are in pain get depressed and feel anxious from time to time. Not only do these events help to erase the stigma, these events help the attendees gain new knowledge, while meeting new friends and new colleagues and through the stories of others, realize that they are not alone while navigating through this new world of Cannabis!

Thanks for your time Sherry and good luck on your next event!

For more information on "Medical Cannabis 411: Let's talk about Chronic Pain & Mental Health" check out the ad for the event in this issue.

