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HOW MEDICAL CANNABIS TOOK ROOT IN MISSISSIPPI

by
Loral Kathryn Winn

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirement of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford
May 2023

Approved By

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DEDICATION PAGE

To my Jesus,
Faithful, sturdy, & the source of everything that is good in me.

“But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.”

-
Acts 20: 24

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To the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College, I am beyond grateful and also still humbled that as a senior in high school, you saw me fit to be a positive addition to the HOCO. Each honors course on my path to 30 hours stretched and challenged me to think outside of the box and outside of myself. I could not be more appreciative of my experience as a member of the Honors College.

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ABSTRACT
HOW MEDICAL CANNABIS TOOK ROOT IN MISSISSIPPI
(Under the direction of Dr. Iveta Imre)

How Medical Cannabis Took Root in Mississippi is a multimedia journalism piece that follows the timeline of medical cannabis' legalization in Mississippi through the lives and lenses of characters from each sector of the medical marijuana industry. Written in a journalistic style with hints of narrative methods, the article tells the story of medical cannabis advocates, current patients, state registered practitioners, dispensary owners and employees, and a family-owned cultivation facility while also providing concrete evidence and facts about the legislation and regulations included in the state's medical marijuana program. While navigating the steps it took to legalize medical cannabis in Mississippi, the piece also sheds light on the current state of the program and some of the issues industry leaders and patients have stumbled upon since its inception, namely high costs.

Website URL: <https://msandmedicalcannabis.wordpress.com>

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PREFACE

As a sophomore in the fall of 2020, I was tasked with creating an in-depth multimedia piece for my Journalism 270 class. I sifted through story ideas for several days, pitching several possible topics that all seemed too typical. That is until I stumbled upon an item on the upcoming ballot in Mississippi. On November 3, 2020, state residents would see a choice for two initiatives regarding the legalization of medical marijuana, or they could check the “neither” box, denoting that they did not want marijuana to become legal for medical use.

By the time I had chosen to fully commit to following the story on medical marijuana possibly coming to Mississippi, Initiative 65—one of two different measures on the ballot—had passed with an overwhelming majority of the votes. I soon began conducting research on every aspect of medical marijuana and what its enactment would mean for the state.

My analysis of medical marijuana extended far beyond simply digging into Mississippi’s bill. I not only wanted to understand the intricacies of the two measures that had been proposed on the November 2020 ballot, but I also desired to have a clear understanding of the legal implementations, qualifying medical conditions, possible timeline for beginning to sell medical cannabis in the state, and formats and experiences from other medical marijuana programs in comparable states like Arkansas and Oklahoma.

In complete honesty, I never intended or wanted to spend two years researching, following, conducting interviews on, and writing and producing stories about medical marijuana. To put it simply, if given a list of topics to choose from, I think I would have been the last person to put my name next to medical marijuana. I was raised in Tennessee, a state that has not legalized medical cannabis and only allows CBD oil for medical use, my entire life by a family who in no way sheltered me but certainly did not approve of the use of such drugs recreationally. When I thought of marijuana, the only words that came to mind were “bad” and “wrong.”

With these same sentiments in the back of my mind, I spent nearly three weeks compiling information and conducting interviews with several people including a political science professor, the Director of Communication at the Mississippi Department of Health, dispensary owners in Arkansas, the public spokesperson for the Medical Marijuana 2020 organization, and Oxford residents. These conversations brought life to a print story and supplementary video focused on Oxford residents’ perspectives on the legalization of medical marijuana in their state.

The multimedia project closed this chapter of my reporting with a bow I was quite proud of, or so I thought. In August 2022, I sat in Dr. Iveta Imre’s office to discuss my thesis research from the summer and how we would move forward to defense. My original thesis topic was not medical marijuana. However, a quick conversation with Dr. Imre convinced me that it might be a topic worth committing more study towards, as the bill that passed in 2020 had been overturned by the Mississippi Supreme Court on May 14, 2021. It wasn’t until February 2, 2022, that medical cannabis was officially legalized in the state. Things were just starting to get interesting.

Dr. Imre’s Journalism 590 course in the fall semester of 2022 was centered around “Good Medicine?”, the title for a larger body of work that students produced on every facet of medical

marijuana in Mississippi. I used this class as my research course for the thesis, covering stories about medical cannabis through video and writing. The pieces I created included patients' personal success stories with medical marijuana, community concerns about dispensaries opening, a medical cannabis clinic, and how Mississippi universities would handle the legalization of medical marijuana on their campuses.

My research and findings throughout the fall semester allowed me to connect with several key figures in the medical marijuana movement in Mississippi, namely Angie Calhoun. Her son, Austin, battled the excruciating symptoms of Lyme disease with medications and doctor visits before finally finding relief with medical marijuana. I was drawn to both Angie and Austin's stories, but I determined that it was Angie who was the main character of the project I was overseeing.

At nearly every stop I made on the medical marijuana trail, Angie Calhoun's name was mentioned. From practitioners to dispensary owners to growers to patients, most individuals are familiar with Calhoun. I spent time over the phone, on Zoom, through texts and emails, and eventually, in person both in Oxford and at her office in Flowood, Mississippi fostering a relationship with Angie, her son, and her non-profit organization, the Mississippi Cannabis Patients Alliance.

The body of work I completed to serve as my Honors Thesis Project is a multimedia journalism piece that details the current state of the medical marijuana program since its inception, the network of patients, physicians, dispensaries, and growers as well as the role Angie Calhoun's organization and relationships play in the program's development. The article resides on its own Word Press site, <https://msandmedicalcannabis.wordpress.com>, which includes various multimedia elements such as videos packages, audio clips, and photographs.

The investigative role I have gotten to play while working on this project has been one of my favorite parts of the process. I have thoroughly enjoyed stretching myself and my perspective as I poked and prodded a multitude of people about medical marijuana. I have found research and investigation to be two of my strong suits and passions.

In addition, someone can rarely experience history firsthand, and my position as a journalist has allowed me to not only experience such history but also capture bits and pieces of it to share with others both presently and in the future.

Following this preface, an introduction to the legalization process of medical marijuana in Mississippi and an overview of the rules patients, physicians, dispensaries, and cultivators are subject to can be found. The thesis will provide insight into my writing process, strategy for determining interviewees, a glossary of key terms referenced within the article, and the article itself, which will tell the story of medical cannabis in Mississippi.

The thesis' conclusion will detail my experience throughout the process of both writing the thesis and conducting research, organizing interviews, and producing the video packages shown within the article. It will also touch on some of the additional items I was unable to include in the article that I believe would be positive additions to the multimedia piece.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Medical marijuana was first legalized in California in 1996. According to the [National Conference of State Legislatures](#), 38 states, three U.S. territories, and the District of Columbia have medical cannabis programs as of today. Research shows that Mississippi began work towards amending marijuana laws in 1978 when the [state decriminalized the possession](#) of 30 grams or less of marijuana.

In 2014, the state passed the Harper Grace Law, named after a then 2-year-old girl in Mississippi who had a rare form of epilepsy. The law allowed only doctors at the University of Mississippi Medical Center to research and dispense CBD oil to patients suffering from epilepsy, according to the [Mississippi Cannabis Information site](#).

However, [WAPT in Jackson](#) reported in 2016 that Harper Grace Durval still did not have access to the medicine two years after the bill in her name passed due to federal restrictions. The article credits Dr. Larry Walker, who at the time was the director for Ole Miss's National Center for Natural Products Research, with saying, "It takes a lot of money to prepare these products and get them ready and registered, and in this case, on top of this, we have the regulatory aspects of it."

On July 30, 2018, Mississippians for Compassionate Care, an organization of individuals in the state who sought to help patients suffering from chronic medical conditions gain legal access to medical marijuana, filed an initiative through Mississippi's Secretary of State's office. The proposed amendment would make medical marijuana, also known as cannabis, legal in Mississippi. Harper Grace's mother, Ashley Durval, is listed in official documents as the initiative's sponsor.

Before, the organization could amend the state constitution with this initiative, Mississippians for Compassionate Care would need to secure more than 100,000 signatures from across the state.

In time, the organization turned to funding and operating a campaign called [Medical Marijuana 2020](#). The campaign aimed to have their amendment, Initiative 65, placed on the November 2020 ballot. The change would allow persons diagnosed with one of more than 20 debilitating medical conditions by a qualified physician to be able to obtain medical marijuana from a "licensed and regulated treatment center." The initiative was also clear in noting that the amount of medical cannabis and the time period in which the product is purchased is strictly monitored and limited.

By September 2019, Medical Marijuana 2020 had submitted [more than 214,000 signatures](#), but only 105,686 were validated. Nevertheless, this number of signatures far exceeded the requirement, and the organization proceeded to file the measure with the Mississippi State Legislature on January 7, 2020, which complies with the state's process for filing an indirect initiative.

Initiative 65 was set to be on the November 2020 ballot just a day after the group's filing with the state legislature. After years of fighting to change marijuana-related laws in Mississippi, Initiative 65, shown on the ballot for Mississippians to mark their decision about a possible

constitutional amendment. However, the state legislature moved to create an alternative measure, Initiative 65A.

To the shock of some and excitement of many others, the citizen-proposed Initiative 65 passed on November 3 with more than 70 percent of residents voting in its favor.

Medical Marijuana 2020's campaign was overseen by six professionals including Communications Director Jamie Grantham. During the campaign and after the measure's approval, Grantham served as the public spokesperson and media contact for any inquiries about INITIATIVE 65 and the organization's vision for its legalization in the state.

In speaking with her after the results of the ballot proved to be successful for medical marijuana and its supporters, Grantham indicated that this was a huge win for the state's patients.

"A lot of people have tried to make it a political issue," said Grantham, "but it's not a political issue. This affects people's families. This affects people's quality of life, and in some cases, it has actually saved their lives."

Grantham deeply desired for Mississippi residents to have access to the same medical options that other states had, which is the main reason Medical Marijuana 2020 advocated for the medical legalization of cannabis.

"We believe that Mississippians should have that same option," Grantham said. "They shouldn't have to move out of state or suffer needlessly when this option is available. My whole team and I are very happy and thankful this has passed because it's going to help so many."

Much of the state seemed excited to move forward with a medical marijuana program, but on May 14, 2021, the Mississippi Supreme Court struck down Initiative 65, finding that the measure did not conform to rules regarding the number of signatures allowed per the now four districts, not five, laid out in the state constitution. The ruling was prompted by a lawsuit that the City of Madison filed and it affected not only Initiative 65, but every other initiative approved in the state since 2003.

The [official document](#) for the Mississippi Supreme Court's ruling on Initiative 65 states, "We hold that the petition submitted to the Secretary of State seeking to place Initiative 65 on the ballot for the November 3, 2020, general election was insufficient."

The court determined that the measure was unconstitutional regardless of how many votes it previously received. While those who proposed and voted on the measure were infuriated at the court's decision, Mississippi State Representative, Trey Lamar, insisted that the Initiative 65 ruling was what was best for the state, according to an article by [Mississippi Today](#).

"The language of Initiative 65 that would have gone into our constitution was not good for the people of Mississippi," Lamar said. "Now, we should craft a legitimate medical marijuana program that will truly help the people who would benefit from it without all of the unintended consequences that would have come with 65."

State leaders worked to do just that, and in January 2022, the Senate passed Bill 2095 after months of debate. Senate Bill 2095 was presented by ten senators to the governor who requested an extensive amount of editing be done to the bill, or he would veto it outright. Governor Tate Reeves was most concerned with the amount of medical marijuana available to patients, arguing the program was teetering on the line of supporting recreational use.

The House passed the amended version of Bill 2095 on January 19, 2022, and a week later, the Senate adopted the bill. Governor Reeves signed the legislation into law on [February 2, 2022](#).

Under the new law, patients wishing to obtain a medical marijuana card must first see a state certified physician, nurse practitioner, physician assistant, or optometrist in person.

Once the physician determines that the patient has one of the more than 20 debilitating medical conditions, he or she will register the patient's qualifying medical condition electronically on their Mississippi State Department of Health (MSDH) practitioner portal. Following this step, the patient who must also be a permanent resident of the state, can then apply for an identification card with the MSDH to become part the state program's registry.

Once the application is approved, it is available through the program's official patient portal and can be used digitally or printed as a physical copy. Patients are typically informed about their status within 10 days of applying.

It is important to note that patients who are ages 18-25 must be diagnosed by two certified practitioners from "separate medical practices" unless the patient is homebound due to illness or had already received an identification card before turning 18.

Much like patients, practitioners who wish to be able to register patients for a medical cannabis card must go through an application process prior to being approved. Practitioners are required to have eight hours of continuing education before applying the first time and must complete five hours of additional education for each annual-certification renewal.

Dispensaries apply for licenses through the Mississippi Department of Revenue (MDOR) and must pay a non-refundable application fee of \$15,000. An extensive list of requirements can be found on the MDOR website, but of absolute importance is proof that the dispensary location is not within 1,000 feet of a school, church, or childcare facility. A dispensary also cannot be located within 1,500 feet of another dispensary.

Finally, a cannabis cultivation facility must apply for licensure through the MSDH with complete plans for several things including security, which types of cannabis products will be produced at the facility, and the disposal of cannabis waste.

There is a distinction in the department's rules between micro-cultivators and cultivators, which is determined size. The bigger the facility, the more expensive the application and annual fees.

The Mississippi Medical Cannabis Program is extensive and somewhat difficult to fully grasp by simply reading a list of regulations and hard facts. The purpose of this piece is to both inform and humanize the program by providing patient testimonies, interesting perspectives from dispensary workers, cultivators, and a physician as well as deep, personal experiences from other individuals involved in the program.

Marijuana does remain illegal under federal law due to its Schedule I classification by the United States Drug Enforcement Administration.

WRITING PROCESS

After compiling and evaluating nearly two years' worth of research and content, I decided that creating a multimedia journalism piece would be the most effective way to tell the story of medical cannabis in Mississippi. Though quotations in interviews and descriptive phrases can paint a picture and capture emotions, the legalization of medical marijuana in Mississippi is a groundbreaking storyline and a piece of the state's history that is far too big to fully grasp with the use of words alone.

According to the [Advanced Media Institute at Berkeley](#), a multimedia story is a combination of text, photographs, video, audio, and graphics on a website that is presented in a “nonlinear format in which the information each medium is complementary, not redundant.” The definition of nonlinear in terms of a multimedia story means that the reader or viewer can choose to navigate throughout the story how he or she wishes. The format is not rigid.

The non-textual elements of the multimedia piece should not tell the same story that the written article explains. Each media element should tell a different part of the story. This is the meaning of the term non-redundant.

The article is lengthy and provides both detailed facts and personal stories and experiences. The video packages that have been advantageously placed within the article on its website tell their own stories, but the narrative is connected to someone or something in the written piece. The same is true of the audio clips and photographs used in the section about cultivation facilities.

My intent and goal in weaving the story together in the way I did is to have each element enhance the other. I touched on some specific areas of the medical cannabis industry more in videos than I did in the article, and in turn, many things found in the article are not said in the videos, audio clips, or photographs.

The medical marijuana industry is full of visual opportunities. I would argue that someone who is unfamiliar with certain elements of the industry or even completely unaware of how medical cannabis works, can learn more through seeing and hearing about it than reading. Because of this idea, I chose to develop the information and content into a multimedia piece that covers nearly every aspect of the Mississippi Medical Cannabis Program.

My research from sources including the Mississippi Department of Health, the Mississippi Marijuana Laws, and Ballotpedia among several others guided me in both obtaining contacts for interviews and determining who I needed to contact for questions. The content creation side of the project began in September 2022, but while I began producing video packages, I continued to track new information and data as it was made available.

Since the fall semester, I conducted interviews with more than 15 people while gathering information, but I only used 11 of these interviews in the article presented in this thesis. Two of these individuals are not mentioned in the articles, but they do play a role in two of the video packages included in the multimedia piece. Each interview was conducted either in person, via Zoom, or by phone. The interviews occurred as follows:

Interview Subjects:

1. Angie Calhoun: Founder, MS Cannabis Patients Alliance – In Person
2. Austin Calhoun: Medical Cannabis Patient, Angie’s Son—Zoom & In Person
3. Dr. Kirk Kinard: Owner, Pause Pain & Wellness Clinics, Chronic Pain Specialist – In Person & Phone Call
4. Angela Carlisle: Prospective Medical Cannabis Patient – In Person
5. Sandra Newman: Prospective Medical Cannabis Patient (video only) – In Person
6. Tony Barragan: Owner, Hybrid Relief Medical Cannabis Dispensary & CBD – In Person & Phone Call
7. Anthonee Monson: Director of Operations, Hybrid Relief Medical Cannabis Dispensary – In Person
8. Josh Gee: Medical Cannabis Patient (video only) – Zoom
9. Cameron Chapman: Area Development Manager, Star Buds Medical – In Person
10. Cory Williamson: Lead Compliance Officer, New Altitude Farms – Phone Call
11. Lorri Williamson: Founder & Owner, New Altitude Farms – In Person

GLOSSARY

Allotment: The amount of medical cannabis a patient in Mississippi can purchase but not exceed in a set period (6 units per week)

Budtender: The title of a staff member who works at a medical cannabis dispensary; answers questions about products and helps patients identify products they want or need.

Card: The identification card that proves a patient or caregiver has been registered by a qualified registering practitioner through the MS State Department of Health’s practitioner portal, submitted an application for registration with the department, and been approved by the department to legally obtain medical cannabis; often referred to as a “medical marijuana card” or a “registration identification card.”

Chronic pain: As defined by the Mississippi State Department of Health, a pain state in which the cause of the pain cannot be removed or otherwise treated, and which in the generally accepted course of medical practice, no relief or cure of the cause of pain is possible, or none has been found after reasonable efforts by a practitioner.

Cannabis: All parts of the plant of the genus cannabis; the flower, the seeds, the resin extracted from the plant and each compound, manufacture, salt derivative, mixture or preparation of the plant, its seeds or resin, including whole plant extracts.

Cannabis cultivation facility: A business entity licensed and registered by the Mississippi Department of Health that acquires, grows, cultivates, and harvests medical cannabis in an indoor, enclosed, locked, and secure area.

Cannabis products: Cannabis flower, concentrated cannabis, cannabis extracts and products that are infused with cannabis or an extract thereof and are intended for use of consumption by humans. (i.e., edible cannabis products, beverages, topical products, ointments, oils, tinctures, and suppositories that contain THC and/or CBD, except products excluded under the MS Code).

Department: The Mississippi State Department of Health

Edibles: Products containing cannabinoids that are eaten or drank.

Flower: The dried flower bud of a female cannabis plant. It is sold at dispensaries but can also be used to make other cannabis products.

Medical cannabis dispensary: As defined by the Mississippi State Department of Health, an entity licensed and registered with the Mississippi Department of Revenue that acquires, possesses, stores, transfers, sells, supplies, or dispenses medical cannabis, equipment used for medical cannabis, or related supplies and educational material to cardholders.

Medical cannabis industry: Refers to any aspect, position, or piece of the medical cannabis program in Mississippi including, but not limited to, registered practitioners, dispensaries, and cultivation and testing facilities.

Practitioner: A broad term that refers to a physician (Medical Doctor/ Doctor of Osteopathy), certified nurse practitioner, physician assistant or optometrist who is licensed to prescribe medicine under the licensing requirements or their respective occupational boards and the laws of Mississippi. For minors, the term “practitioner” must mean only a physician (MD/DO) with the same qualifications as above.

Qualifying patients: The term that refers to patients who have been diagnosed with one of the more than 20 debilitating conditions listed on the MS State Department of Health’s website that qualifies them to receive medical treatment through the use of medical cannabis.

THE ARTICLE

How Medical Cannabis Took Root in Mississippi

Medical marijuana dispensaries have been open and selling products to qualifying patients since the beginning of 2023. Per an article published by WJTV in Jackson, the [first legal medical marijuana sale](#) in the state took place on January 25 in Brookhaven, though this has been disputed. Presently, official records on the Mississippi Medical Cannabis Program's website show 178 total registered dispensaries across the state.

Physicians are regularly certifying patients to obtain medical cannabis cards, and the patients suffering with one of the law's more than 20 medical conditions now have access to alternative means of relief. According to information provided directly by the MS State Department of Health through email, 9,719 patients have medical marijuana cards as of April 28.

In addition to these numbers, 84 cultivator facilities, or places where the marijuana is grown, exist in the state today. On December 30, 2022, State Health Officer Daniel Edney sent an annual report via email to Governor Tate Reeves. The public document states, "Since its inception, the Medical Cannabis Program has generated just over 9.8 million dollars through application and licensure fees."

While the letter details the current and perceived future positives of the state's medical cannabis program, conversations with Mississippi Cannabis Patients Alliance founder Angie Calhoun in early March suggest that there is an unseen reality, both positive and negative, to the program that has caught up with patients and providers alike.

Angie Calhoun & Her Role in the State's Medical Cannabis Industry

On a Monday morning in Flowood, Mississippi, Angie Calhoun sat behind her desk checking emails and tending to unanswered phone messages. She rents an office space outside of Jackson to operate her non-profit, Mississippi Cannabis Patients Alliance.

After quickly typing replies to an influx of inquiries on her laptop and answering a call from her son about a dispensary's grand opening they were attending in Tupelo that afternoon, Calhoun put her phone and computer to the side to talk about the present reality of the state's medical cannabis program.

When asked about her perspective on the program since dispensaries have been selling products and patients have been able to purchase medical marijuana, her usually smiling face became unexpectedly serious with a look of disappointment.

"There was a great deal of excitement, initially," Calhoun said, "as patients saw that the dispensary doors had opened, and they could buy a legal product."

"I even had one veteran who actually was like, 'It just felt so good to be legal, leaving that dispensary with my medicine,'" Calhoun said.

Her next remarks explained her change in facial expressions.

“But, seeing the reality of better medication is overpriced, started to set in,” Calhoun said.

She explained that patients are paying anywhere from \$150 to \$500 a year to be certified by a medical cannabis practitioner. In addition to these fees, Calhoun mentioned that the medication is running anywhere from \$900 to \$1,500 a month.

“We’re not a rich state,” Calhoun said. “That’s a huge barrier for many, many people and for our patients to have to cross.”

Mississippi ranks 49th in the country in terms of economy, according to [U.S. News & World Report](#). Per reports created by the [United States Census Bureau](#) in 2022, the state has 19.4 percent of its population living in poverty.

The thought of patient’s not having access to the medicine they need is troubling to Calhoun.

“I feel like all of the work that we’ve done to make sure that we have a program for medical cannabis in our state,” Calhoun said, “if everybody can’t afford it, then we have let a lot of people down and I just don’t want patients to feel that way.”

One of the primary reasons that Mississippi was able to successfully implement a medical marijuana program in the state is the support from residents and leaders. Angie Calhoun is one of several individuals who took extra steps to fight for the realization of the state’s program.

In October 2021, Calhoun founded the Mississippi Cannabis Patients Alliance, a non-profit organization that focuses specifically on serving the state’s patients whose chronic medical conditions could be improved by the proper use of medical marijuana. Prior to her role as CEO of the MCPA, Calhoun served as the board chair for the Mississippi Medical Marijuana Association for nearly a year and owned her own granite company for 20 years.

Her heart, however, truly beat for the patients, and this is because her son, Austin Calhoun, is one of them.

“For over 10 years, my son Austin has had Lyme disease,” Calhoun said. “It became chronic, which means that it was pretty much impossible to get rid of, and it ravaged his autonomic nervous system when he was 17 years old.”

Austin was an active high school student, who enjoyed playing football and spending time with his friends outdoors. In 2013, however, he noticed a mark on the back of one of his legs that was treated as a staph infection by his doctor. Almost three weeks later, Calhoun found himself extremely ill with flu-like symptoms that never subsided.

“Nobody could really tell us what was going on,” Austin said. “It just progressively got worse. I developed a form of epilepsy, chronic nausea, vomiting, and fatigue. I also started developing arthritis really bad in a lot of my joints.”

Austin was ultimately diagnosed with Lyme disease, which he unknowingly contracted from a tick bite. He visited 22 doctors and was prescribed 17 different medications to combat the chronic symptoms he faced. During this time, Austin lost nearly 40 pounds and his mother's concerns for how deathly ill her son appeared heightened.

“One day, I went upstairs to give him his medicine, and it just still haunts me because I walked into his room and he's lying there with a sheet on him,” Angie said. “And it just looked like a little skeleton was lying under that sheet.”

Calhoun realized at that moment that it was time to make a change. She and her husband, Brad, recognized that some of the medications Austin was taking could have severe, lifelong consequences. The couple decided to travel to Colorado Springs, Colorado with Austin to try their hand at an alternative form of care: medical cannabis.

Austin and his parents visited a doctor supported by a thick binder of his medical records from the previous year. The physician quickly asked the family about their reason for the visit.

“I was like, ‘I know that I'm not an in-state resident,’” Austin said. “I know I can't get a medical card. But I just want to know if you think I'm a candidate to get a medical card.’ He looked at me and said, ‘You are the definition of a medical candidate for medical marijuana.’”

Following their appointment, Calhoun legally purchased products at a Colorado dispensary for her son, and Austin vaped medical cannabis for the first time, quickly feeling like himself again for the first time in almost 18 months. At the time, medical marijuana was not legal in Mississippi, so Austin made the tough decision to relocate more than 1,000 miles away from his hometown to Pueblo, Colorado for access to the only form of treatment that helped him to regain his quality of life.

“I had to be somewhere that I didn't have to worry about going to jail for being treated,” Austin said. “It was worth the journey to be able to feel like a normal human being again.”

Austin's success story with medical marijuana changed Calhoun's heart toward medical cannabis. When she found out that Initiative 65 was being pushed, Calhoun knew that she wanted to be a part of it. She was a sponsor of the original measure that was struck down by the state legislature, and in January 2022, when a new, legislator-sponsored version was up for debate, Calhoun delivered a speech from the Capitol steps, encouraging the governor and legislators “to please pass this medical cannabis act.”

Calhoun has now spent years advocating for a medical marijuana program in Mississippi while sharing Austin's story, which has become what she describes as her purpose. When Governor Reeves signed the bill into legislation, Calhoun recalls her excitement for the breakthrough after years of anticipation.

“I felt so elated,” Calhoun said. “It was a huge relief because we fought so hard. I know it's two years, but it seemed like an eternity.”

Medical cannabis' legalization in Mississippi allowed Austin to return home to Mississippi, where he now works for the Mississippi Cannabis Patients Alliance with his mom, providing first-hand experience to patients and advising them on what to look for when purchasing effective products.

"I've just studied this product for a long time," Austin said. "I've seen the medical benefits, and I know kind of some of the outlying factors to be looking for in certain medications."

Calhoun and her son work together to provide for patients in Mississippi by continuously advocating for their wants and needs.

"My mission is just to help as many people as I can to get access to cannabis," Austin said.

As a non-profit organization, the MCPA receives funding from various sponsors including Southern Sky Brands and Pause Pain & Wellness clinics. Upon looking for documents regarding how Calhoun is paid and what the organization's money goes toward, no information about the non-profit's funding sources or expenditures was immediately available online.

Regardless, the branches of Calhoun's work extend throughout every aspect of the medical cannabis program in Mississippi, creating a close-knit network with the dispensaries, cultivation facilities, practitioners, and patients.

Mississippi Patients and Physicians Hope Medical Cannabis Will Offer Relief for Chronic Pain

At the heart of the medical cannabis legislation in Mississippi lie the more than 147,000 patients that Calhoun's Mississippi Cannabis Patients Alliance works to represent. Residents who suffer from one of the more than 20 debilitating medical conditions currently listed on the Department of Health's website qualify for medical cannabis treatment.

Cancer, HIV, AIDS, Alzheimer's disease, PTSD, muscular dystrophy, and autism are just a few of the current qualifying conditions that warrant treatment through medical marijuana. According to the Department of Health, "any Mississippi resident can petition to MSDH to add serious medical conditions or treatments to the existing conditions" listed in the original legislation.

For the patients of Mississippi to be served, practitioners needed to be willing to participate in the medical marijuana program. One of those physicians is Dr. Kirk Kinard.

Kinard is a Mississippi native who specializes in chronic pain management. For almost 15 years, Kinard has treated chronic pain in his patients at his practice, Willow Pain and Wellness in Oxford. His specialty in chronic pain made him interested in the medical cannabis program, but even more so, his experiences with the opioid crisis urged him to seek an alternative for his patients.

“Where does cannabis fit?” Kinard said, “I think it fits before opioids or during opioid therapy to disallow escalation of opioids, potentially deescalate (opioids), or even replace, but you’ve got to be careful about that.”

Though his experience has equipped him with numerous tools to treat chronic pain, Kinard notes that many people still don’t find fulfilling relief. According to him, the term chronic pain, after all, means that the pain typically does not heal to a cure.

When the state passed legislation for the medical marijuana program, Kinard began to dissect the bill and understand the terms of it prior to deciding to be a practitioner who could certify patients.

“This is expected to be a medical experience,” Kinard said. “The underbelly of the whole thing is that we’re calling it medical marijuana. I think anytime you put the word ‘medical,’ if that’s inserted somewhere in whatever you’re doing, it’s important that you prove it.”

It was clear to Kinard that certifying patients who were truly qualified for a medical marijuana card would be a huge undertaking, so he decided to open a separate clinic from his own practice, which would be devoted to seeing, certifying, and helping to register patients for medical cannabis treatment. Kinard opened these Pause Pain and Wellness clinics in eight locations across the state, including Oxford.

“I felt early on [after] looking at the steps required to certify someone and become a certified practitioner and then follow the patient correctly,” Kinard said, “it was going to take a really dedicated effort that would probably be a little bit difficult to pull off in your own practice.”

Prior to becoming a registered certifying practitioner with the Department of Health, Kinard had to apply and complete eight hours of continuing medical education (CME) developed by other physicians and cannabis experts in Mississippi. He, along with other registered practitioners in the state, will be responsible for five hours of CME each year to renew their license.

Pause Pain and Wellness in Oxford opened in July and, soon after, began certifying patients for marijuana cards. By late October, the clinic’s openings were full of patients desiring treatment through cannabis.

Angela Carlisle sat alone in one of the patient rooms, waiting to see Lisa King, a nurse practitioner at Oxford’s Pause Pain location. Her mannerisms made her appear somewhat nervous, and her ability to walk was limited, making her pain more noticeable.

When asked why she came in for a visit, her answer was simple.

“I need some pain assistance,” Carlisle said, “and that’s not available. I’m willing to try anything.”

She has suffered from osteoarthritis in both knees and early signs of degenerative arthritis in her neck for five years. [Osteoarthritis](#) and degenerative arthritis are similar in that both conditions

result in the breaking down of tissues in the joint over time. Research says that forms of arthritis can range from mild to severe, but Carlisle’s symptoms fit on the most painful ends of the scale.

“My knees are the worst,” Carlisle said. “They’re essentially bone on bone, so I don’t have any cartilage left.”

She also has a torn meniscus in one knee, which is a common byproduct of her condition according to the [National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal Skin Diseases](#). With injections and physical therapy offering no relief, Carlisle was given Ultram, which she compares to barely being more than a Tylenol.

It’s not that Carlisle wants a medicine that’s going to “knock her out,” but she does need relief that nothing else thus far has given her.

“When this avenue opened up,” Carlisle said, “I said ‘Why not?’”

The constant feeling of the bones in her knees rubbing against each other has not only affected her, but also limits her experiences with her family and others.

“I have to see you know if we’re going somewhere it’s ‘how far do I have to walk,’” Carlisle said. “I refuse to use a scooter or anything like that just because I feel like people can’t see arthritis and me being overweight. People tend to think, ‘She’s fat. She doesn’t want to walk.’”

With her pain level usually sitting around an eight out of ten, Carlisle hopes to see medical marijuana make her symptoms milder, allowing her to be more active. After all, doctors tell her she is not a candidate for a knee replacement due to her weight.

“I can’t exercise because my knees hurt,” Carlisle said. “I’m hoping that it [medical cannabis] will make me more mobile, and it will make me able to do more and just have a healthier overall life.”

Carlisle is just one of thousands of patients in Mississippi who have been approved to use medical cannabis by qualified practitioners at a Pause Pain and Wellness location. Upon being certified as a qualifying patient, these residents must apply through the state department and pay a one-time \$25 fee to obtain their digital card.

Patients have 60 days after being registered by a practitioner to complete their application and submit it. Otherwise, they will need to start the process over again. It is required that the patients have a follow-up appointment with their practitioner at least every six months after receiving their card to continue its activation.

The initial visit to a [Pause Pain and Wellness](#) clinic is \$199 with the biannual checkups costing \$179. However, a membership plan is available to patients for just \$29 a month.

Angie Calhoun shared her concerns with the expenses involved in entering the medical marijuana program as well as maintaining qualifications. In a phone conversation in April, Dr.

Kinard assured that his patients seem to handle his clinics' prices well and added that he believes the process is successful.

Dispensaries Compete for Patients Amid High Product Costs and a Saturated Market

As patients and practitioners began the process of becoming registered with the health department and obtaining medical marijuana cards, those who looked to enter the business side of the program applied for licenses through the Mississippi Department of Revenue (MDOR). Among these applicants were potential dispensary owners.

In the months after medical marijuana's legalization, it seemed to be a possibility that some people wanting to be involved in the medical cannabis industry were in it more for the money than to help patients. After all, early predictions suggested that the medical marijuana program would become a multi-million-dollar industry.

The outcome may have sounded good originally, but now, it is no secret that owning a dispensary is quite an investment. [Dispensary license requirements](#) are presented on the MDOR website, and they specifically state that the first-year license fees total \$40,000. This large sum is composed of a non-refundable application fee of \$15,000 and an annual license fee of \$25,000.

Strict guidelines must be met for a dispensary to obtain a license, including having an official list of all owners, deeds, sales tax permit numbers, local license registration, and operation and security plans.

One of the first dispensaries to complete this extensive license process and open its doors was Hybrid Relief in Oxford. Owner Tony Barragan contributes the efficiency of his dispensary's opening to his network and experience within the industry.

"The education, regardless of how nice this place looks," Barragan said, "the education is what's going to separate us from everyone else."

More than four years ago, Barragan left the restaurant industry to pursue business opportunities with CBD (cannabidiol), mostly because he began using the product himself and found it to be remarkably effective. However, at the time, Barragan could not find any CBD products in North Mississippi, so he began promoting CBD on his own social media accounts to spread the word about its benefits.

Eventually, Barragan managed to develop a strong following that showed serious interest in CBD, and soon after, he began selling it.

"I decided to purchase some product and start selling it out of my truck, to be honest with you," Barragan said. "It was very successful."

His customers posted about the CBD products on social media and blogs, spreading the word to others about CBD's effectiveness and Barragan's business.

“That’s when I decided to pull the trigger on a brick and mortar,” Barragan said, “and that’s where our location is right now, Hemp Ville CBD.”

Hemp Ville CBD, now Hybrid CBD, opened its location in Oxford just off Jackson Avenue in early 2019 following the 2017 amendment to the Harper Grace Law, which permitted the use of CBD for experimental treatment for seizures and other medical conditions.

Shortly after his CBD storefront opened, Barragan recalls the idea of Initiative 65 being brought to the table. As a matter of fact, he played a crucial role in helping to develop the initiative and collect signatures for its approval. When the law passed in 2020, Barragan purchased the area where his medical cannabis store, Hybrid Relief, now sits.

As the bill was ruled unconstitutional, Barragan had to press pause on his dispensary plans, developing the space into an arcade called Joysticks for a season. Once Governor Reeves signed the new legislation in February 2022, Barragan immediately closed the doors on the arcade and started remodeling the building with his dispensary goals in mind, aiming to open at the end of the fall.

“If everything works out with testing and packaging,” Barragan said, “there’s no reason why we shouldn’t have product on the shelf in the beginning of November.”

Since the last conversation with Barragan in October, Hybrid Relief officially opened in January and has been selling medical cannabis products to patients since. While revisiting the store’s location in April, Hybrid’s Director of Operations Anthonee Monson mentioned the stores success, adding that they see as many as 25 patients some days.

Monson and his coworkers noted that their stores popularity is likely because of the price of their products.

“We have a lot of great relationships with our vendors,” Monson said, “that allow for us to get better pricing, so that way, when we do market up, it’s still not as high as these other places.”

One of Angie Calhoun’s primary concerns with the present reality of the medical marijuana program in Mississippi is the price of product in dispensaries. Though she does have a healthy business relationship with Barragan, Hybrid Relief’s prices are mostly influenced by the feedback from patients.

“We just kind of listen to the patients and see what they’re looking for,” Monson said, “and then we go based off that.”

The three dispensaries in Oxford carry different brands of medical cannabis products, but each of them has products from Southern Sky Brands and Good Day Farms, a local cultivation facility outside of the city limits.

In comparing the prices from each dispensary, Hybrid Relief sells the typical 1/8-ounce bottle of flower from Southern Sky Brands for \$45. Star Buds Medical and Magnolia Cannabis sell the

same product for \$55 and \$53 respectively. However, across the board, a 100-milligram package of Good Day Farm’s gummies sells for \$22.

Though Hybrid Relief seems to have the more affordable products, Cameron Chapman, area development manager at Star Buds Medical, finds that their approach has created only positive results since their opening in late January, regardless of product expenses.

“The response from the community has been great,” Chapman said. “Our return rate is phenomenal. We get busier every day. We see new people every day.”

Before being interviewed at the end of March, Chapman made a call to his owner to ensure that he followed proper protocol, especially since a video interview and other shots of the medical cannabis store and its products were requested. The Star Bud’s owner allowed video to be taken in the store so long as no patient was filmed, and no product was touched by someone without a licensed medical marijuana card.

The cautiousness and intentionality of both Chapman and the entire Star Bud’s staff stood out, seeing as other dispensaries weren’t quite as strict in terms of checking even the smallest regulation boxes.

During a call with Chapman in late April, he made it apparent that patients who visit Star Buds understand the medical cannabis they need is like any medicine and requires an expense, small or large. The quality of care at Star Buds seems to be what keeps bringing people back.

“It’s a very personalized experience that we give here at Star Buds,” Chapman said. “The funny thing about it is, when you walk in, you’re a stranger. Once you walk out, you’re family.”

When a patient walks into a dispensary, they are usually greeted by someone at a check in window who will identify them by checking their medical marijuana card and their ID. Then, the patient is taken to the area where they can purchase medical cannabis if they have not already used all their allotment.

Patients are permitted to purchase six units of medical cannabis per week, and it is important to note that each form of cannabis is measured differently. Purchasing 21 grams of flower is the same as buying 600 milligrams of edibles. Both are one unit.

Once allotments are confirmed, a budtender will speak with the patient, guiding him or her through the process of choosing products that will suit their needs. Chapman believes that the role of a budtender is crucial in a patient’s overall experience at a dispensary.

“It is absolutely important that you make your patients feel comfortable when they step foot in your door,” Chapman said.

The medical cannabis industry is ever-changing and competitive. Chapman has seen almost every side of it since entering the industry in 2018. Thus far, however, his favorite part is seeing people in pain regain their quality of life.

“Seeing those success stories,” Chapman said, “seeing people go from being unsure to becoming full-fledged advocates for cannabis...that is why I come back every day. That is what keeps me in this business.”

How A Fourth-Generation Farming Family Turned to Medical Cannabis Cultivation

The root, both literally and metaphorically, of the medical cannabis program in Mississippi lies in the places where marijuana plants are strategically grown, manicured, and cut. These cultivation facilities, often referred to as growers, are one of the final branches of the state’s medical cannabis industry and one of the most important.

Much like the investment required for dispensaries, the process of preparing and opening a cultivation facility is not cheap or simple. The licensing procedure is extensive. The regulations are tight, and the expenses are substantial.

Of the 84 cultivator facilities in Mississippi, one has a story different than most. In 2021, Williamson Family Farms in Water Valley, stopped growing the cotton, soybeans, corn, and sweet potatoes they had harvested for over four generations to begin producing medical cannabis.

The family owned and operated farm started an LLC on April 1, 2021, renaming itself New Altitude Farms. Their land has been the source of typical row crops for decades and has even grown its share of Christmas trees too. Today, the farm operated by Mike Williamson grows cannabis plants in what used to be a sweet potato shed for the patients of Mississippi.

It was Mike’s wife, Lorri, who had the idea to change the farm’s niche from cotton and beans to cannabis after seeing her dad battle cancer. Their son, Cory, who is an attorney and the farm’s compliance officer shared his family farm’s story.

“My mother and her father were exceptionally tight,” Williamson said. “They had a really close relationship. Spoke every day. Saw each other most days. He passed away from lung cancer in 2007.”

Williamson attributes his mother’s experience seeing her dad suffer through cancer to the reason his family “headed down this path.” Lorri’s father was given morphine to ease his pain while battling cancer. According to the [American Cancer Society](#), opioids like morphine are commonly used to help subdue cancer patient’s pain.

However, just as Williamson recalls, morphine can cause a patient’s breathing to slow, severe nausea and vomiting, and increased tiredness, per information from the [Mayo Clinic](#) online. Lorri knew there had to be a better option for patients like her dad.

“Through all that time she researched and continued reading,” Williamson said. “There’s an awful lot of information out there that shows that, in the very least (medical cannabis) helps with pain, nausea, and a lot of things that accompany various sicknesses.”

When Initiative 65 came about and the option for medical marijuana in Mississippi appeared, Lorri jumped at the opportunity.

“She was just like, ‘Alright, we’re doing it,’” Williamson said. “All of a sudden, we became a family medical marijuana farm.”

Williamson describes his mother as “the most charismatic person that may have ever walked.” Lorri is the founder and owner of New Altitude Farms, making it a fully female-owned business, which is something Williamson boasted about more than once. Lorri was a professor at Ole Miss for 30 years, and, as her son noted, “she’s really likeable.”

Though she gave the interviewing duties to her son, Lorri shared her reason for wanting to turn the family farm into a cultivation site on a recent visit to the facility. As a woman of faith, she has no prior experience with cannabis, but she reminds people that Christians are called to serve. Each day brings new challenges and obstacles to her small cultivation site, but she knows patients are being helped, which is exactly why she embarked on this journey.

The shift to growing medical cannabis did not come easy to Mike Williamson either, though his son says he might not say that out loud. The state requires medical cannabis to be grown indoors in a secure facility. Mike, who is now 70, has spent nearly every year of his life outside on the farm. Now, he works inside, managing a much different set of crops.

“It’s such a completely different thing,” Williamson said. “This is really science based and very meticulous, and everything is on such a micro scale compared to what he was doing. It’s just different.”

Regardless, the farm obtained its license to grow in June 2022 and had seeds planted in the ground by early September. Williamson, like other members of the state’s medical marijuana program, mentioned the investment his family put into the cultivation facility.

“The input costs are tremendous on the cultivation,” Williamson said. “The lights alone were \$300,000 for the grow lights.”

New Altitude Farms is completely family funded, meaning they took no money from investors to build their facility and purchase seeds to begin growing. In the process of outfitting the sweet potato shed, their first set of lights were lost in a storage facility that burned down. That loss added to the already long list of the farm’s expenses.

Within the Mississippi State Department of Health’s official document on cultivation facilities, the fees for growers are listed in sections of micro-cultivators and cultivators. The expenses, both initially and annually, differ between the two distinctions. A micro-cultivator, as it sounds, operates a facility that is less than 2,000 square feet with an annual license fee of \$2,000 to \$3,500.

Cultivators can oversee a facility that is as small as 2,000 square feet to one as large as 100,000 square feet or more. The MSDH classifies these facilities as Tier I to Tier VI, which refers to the size. Cultivation facilities this large have annual license fees beginning at \$15,000 and topping out at as much as \$150,000.

In addition to the expenses, Lorri and her son mentioned the challenges that come with being a small, local cultivation site. Getting their products into dispensaries has proven to be difficult along with the fact that the large, national companies are cutting the costs of their harvests when selling to dispensary owners, forcing New Altitude Farms to do the same.

Nevertheless, the family farm's products can currently be found at Herbal Alchemy in Hernando and The Magg Dispensary in Columbus.

Though the cost of becoming a cultivation facility is high and the learning curve to growing new product was evident, the Williamson family has kept their core values the same. In fact, Williamson shared that one of his mom's friends made a post on Facebook that encapsulated their family's story best.

The friend wrote a hashtag that read, "Same farm new crop." Williamson believes that this phrase sums up New Altitude Farm's mission. His family has simply found a new way to use their passion and purpose to serve their community, loved ones, and state. The fact that it is a source of income is just a small piece of their new project.

"They're still just family farmers in a small town like they've always been," Williamson said. "The same exact people just a new crop. They believe in it, and they believe it helps people and that's what they're doing."

The Future of Mississippi's Medical Cannabis Program

In terms of the program's future, hope seems to be the common factor in the expressions of those involved in the medical cannabis industry in Mississippi. From patients to dispensary owners, many people find that the state's legalization of medical cannabis has been positive. However, like anything new, every day proves to be a learning curve for patients, practitioners, dispensaries, cultivation facilities, and the state's leaders.

As Angie Calhoun mentioned, the price is a noticeable hiccup in nearly every aspect of the medical cannabis program. From the expense of doctor's appointments to the price of products in local dispensaries, it is no secret that both obtaining medical marijuana as a treatment for patients and participating in the industry's business side are investments.

In February 2023, Americans for Safe Access (ASA) published its [annual report](#), which contained evaluations of each state's medical cannabis program. Mississippi received an F due to the fact that the report's grading was based off laws that were in effect as of December 31, 2022.

The report recognized, however, that when products began being sold and patients had proper access to medical cannabis, “Mississippi will no doubt expect to see a change in the grade in the 2023 report.”

All in all, Mississippi’s medical cannabis program is a revenue generating source for the state that, although it still has several critics, is said to be improving the quality of life of nearly 10,000 patients today. Industry leaders like Calhoun expect the state’s program to continue to grow and, hopefully, thrive in the future.

CONCLUSIONS

I can safely say that this Honors Thesis Project has been one of the more challenging endeavors I have taken on during my time at the university. It is certainly no simple task to manage a normal course load and work toward completing a project of this size and stature, but I am grateful that the Honors College encourages students to stretch themselves. I am proud of the body of work that I was able to produce with an overwhelming amount of help from my Thesis Committee.

If I had all the time in the world to make this project perfect, I certainly would have done it. However, each person involved in this Thesis is busy and has several responsibilities outside of completing this multimedia journalism piece. All in all, I am pleased with the product, but there are certainly things I would have liked to add or spent more time manicuring.

One of the main points I would like to emphasize is that attempting to write and narrate the story of medical cannabis in Mississippi is a massive undertaking. Each section of the article was written in the order and way which I thought best at the time. However, I would argue that if I wrote this article a second time, each story could be a bit different than it was the first time.

In saying that, I did note in my “Writing Process” section that there were details from the “Literature Review” that were not included in each piece of the article. I made a journalistic and creative decision to share the information I did and to withhold from inserting some of the regulations and requirements. My goal was to humanize the medical cannabis program. I wanted to put faces with the broad term that seems to have its own connotation.

Each section of the article could have been written ten or more different ways because, to put it simply, that is just how vast the storyline of the legalization of medical cannabis in Mississippi truly is.

The media area is one that I would like to see enhanced in the story and on the WordPress site. Currently, it is full of different mediums of media, but I would have liked to have produced more content, but again, time is a limitation and was certainly one during this project.

I also would prefer to polish the WordPress site some more. I didn’t focus much on adding information to every section that the website allows authors to utilize. Truthfully, WordPress is not the easiest site to navigate through, but I want the website where the article lives to be presentable and something I am proud to have made. I will likely be spending some time on the website in the coming days.

At the end of the day, I do believe that this Honors Thesis is a success, regardless of the many notes I could find to criticize. I have always been told that no journalism piece will ever be perfect, but I do think my committee and I managed to create one of the better bodies of work I have seen on this topic.

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