

Larissa

Amber: Hello I'm Amber Lennox. We will be joined today by Larissa Balkissoon, the recent winner of the Kent Law Review's essay competition, her piece, and what it means to her. Welcome Larissa.

Larissa: Thank you, it's my pleasure.

Amber: Firstly, tell me a bit about yourself.

Larissa: My name is Larissa Balkissoon, I'm 26 years old, I just graduated from the Senior Status LLB programme, which is a 2 year programme. Previously I did a bachelor of science in Ottawa, so I do have a science background which ties into what we will be talking about later. I'm currently in Toronto!

Amber: Thank you for that introduction, Toronto sounds amazing. Tell me about the competition, how do you feel after winning?

Larissa: Definitely amazing, but also shocked! To be honest, the content of the paper I wrote is one that generally isn't well-received, so I'm quite surprised at the positive reception. I was so used to backlash over this topic, so now I'm happy to see the open honest conversations we're having.

Amber: I read your piece, and it was honestly inspiring. Could you tell us a bit about it for those who haven't a full idea of what you have written? What inspired you?

Larissa: Of course. My piece is called 'Cannabis: A Political Garden Tool', I came up with the title the night before, and I

felt like it just fit perfectly. What I wanted to achieve with this paper is to basically look at the inequalities that exist in our criminal justice system. I wrote this piece for my dissertation, and I just really wanted to take a look at where race and law enforcement really meet, especially in light of the pandemic and recent news, because there's no denying the correlation between race and the law. We cannot keep pretending that race and law have nothing to do with each other, especially as law students, and it's time we address that. The reason I specifically spoke about cannabis and not any other drug is because I do have a personal connection to the topic. I work in the cannabis industry as an educator at one of the largest chains of legal dispensaries in downtown Toronto. My background is West Indian, both of my parents are Trinidadian. We have essentially moved from one colony to the other, and my ancestors actually brought cannabis seeds to the Caribbean, by people coming from India. People attach the idea of cannabis to the black community, when it was the Indian community who brought it over. It's such a complex topic for me. I know people who have suffered at the hands of law enforcement because of cannabis, which is interesting because more people use cannabis than you think, and it's time to move past the stereotypes.

Amber: It's so interesting you mention this connection between race and the law. There must be racial profiling.

Larissa: Definitely. My white peers do not get treated the same way my peers of colour did. The concept of laziness is often attached to the peers of colour, but that laziness doesn't necessarily translate when we start looking at different cultural groups.

Amber: For those who don't know, this essay had the theme of law and justice, a very broad topic. In the same vein really I was going to ask what drew you to this topic specifically.

Larissa: I think timing. In 2018 cannabis was legalised in Canada, and I came to Canterbury in 2019. Although it's regulated the same way alcohol is, the government didn't really take the time to research the effects and consequences of legalising it. I always wanted to tackle the topic so my dissertation presented a great opportunity for that. I had to remove a chunk of my essay to submit it for this competition, so it was hard to pinpoint exactly what I wanted to talk about. I think what's most frustrating is how my ancestors have used it for thousands of years and we were criminalised, but now that it's legalised it's the cool thing to do. I see it a lot in my workplace – it's frustrating.

Amber: What is one of the most harmful stereotypes you feel exist?

Larissa: Definitely the intersection of gang violence and cannabis use. After the legalisation the government did a research discovered the two were not related at all. This was in my dissertation but I had to cut it out due to word count.

Amber: Do you feel as if the illegal status of cannabis affects gang violence?

Larissa: Yes. In my paper I speak about legalisation, but there is a difference between legalisation and decriminalisation. The latter is necessary because people should not be behind bars for cannabis, but legalisation is a different infrastructure and

creates different rules and regulations. That's what Canada is trying to do, legalise instead of just decriminalise.

Amber: What do you think about what Canada is doing?

Larissa: Legalisation has its benefits. I personally don't support young people using it as it's harmful for their brain development, so it's a relief to see regulations put in place. You need to present ID, you need to be of legal age.

Amber: So do you feel that gang violence or activity changed after the legalisation?

Larissa: I'll preface this by saying I can only talk about Canada since I didn't grow up in England. When I was younger, cannabis was decriminalised, so I knew I would not be arrested for possession. There were bigger problems for law enforcement than a 21 year old with some cannabis in their pocket. In that time the black market thrived – it was legal but there were no dispensaries to buy from. The government assumed that would be sufficient to stop gang violence, but it really wasn't. Legalisation was helpful because dispensaries existed, but some people still preferred black markets. I think it's important to understand that even if cannabis is legalised, that doesn't end crime – there will always be something else. Someone is always trying to get something they shouldn't be getting. There will definitely be an impact – but not what the government is expecting.

Amber: You have obviously written this piece which is being published soon. Who in your head was your target audience? Who did you want to see this?

Larissa: There's not one person. Maybe my mother was in my mind. Although cannabis is very much in our culture, it's still something that's stigmatised. So maybe I hoped to change her mind.

Amber: What did you think the reception would be?

Larissa: I was unfamiliar with Canterbury and assumed that this is a taboo topic, so it's refreshing to see that I'm defying some stereotypes by looking at this through an academic lens. People need to stop stereotyping what a cannabis user is, and remove the harmful stigma. Cannabis is so versatile, and there are so many uses for it. This is a plant that grows from the ground. It can heal and harm just as much as any other plant.

People like me were displaced, and we had to hold onto whatever we had before we were displaced. That's what cannabis is for us. The UK displaced us, moved us around, and criminalised what was cultural for us. This is an impact of colonisation, and indeed a postcolonial subject.

Amber: You say that cannabis is a plant and should not be stigmatised the way it is. What do you feel about people calling it a gateway drug? Do you feel it leads to serious addictions, especially as someone in the industry?

Larissa: One thing I will say is that there is not enough credible research to call cannabis a gateway drug. Gateway drugs don't even exist from a scientific perspective. This is false stereotypes and stigma speaking – not real scientific research. If someone smokes cannabis for 10 years then does heroin, the reason might be some trauma or personal issues,

not because cannabis is a gateway drug. We need to start looking at circumstances.

Amber: In the UK, I can go and have a drink and it's perfectly fine. Alter my circumstances and I might become an alcoholic. Maybe a traumatic event happened, maybe I'm suffering. There should be more support and education instead of blatant dehumanisation.

Larissa: One point I did want to make is the concept of dependancy and addiction changes culture to culture. What is okay in one country is not in another. I knew someone in Pakistan who learnt that an ounce of alcohol is alcoholism in medical school. Alcohol is such a big part of British culture that that statement sounds obscure. I don't have an issue with alcohol, but if we can understand that the definition of alcoholism differs in the UK and a country like Pakistan, why isn't that same train of thought extended to cannabis? Cannabis is not a part of European culture at all, but it is a part of other cultures. So many people die from alcoholism but not cannabis use, and yet the government brushes over alcohol use.

Amber: What do you think about the movement of cannabis being dangerous not because of the plant itself, but because of what is mixed in it to sell illegally? Shouldn't legalisation remove that threat?

Larissa: That's a good point. I should reiterate that in Canada, legalisation didn't remove the black markets, that's a job for education. While legalisation will help make cannabis safer, it is ultimately up for education to eradicate that problem. Instead of scaring people, especially teenagers, let's be honest

with them. Tell them the damage it can cause to young brains that are still developing. Don't tell them 'don't use it'.

Amber: How do you think this correlates to race?

Larissa: I have had people assume I sell weed because of my skin tone, even an educator assumed I used cannabis when I was a teenager. This is stereotypes that can cause trauma, and it's just going to keep happening until we stop it.

Amber: Do you feel that Generation Z and Millennials are seeing a turn around on those attitudes?

Larissa: Painfully slowly. Because of people like me who talk about it. It's like mental health issues – start talking about it.

Amber: Again a big congratulations on winning the competition, your paper was amazing and deserved it. I just have to know: now that you're in your career and slowly advancing, how do you hope to implement your law degree?

Larissa: I'm looking into working in the cannabis industry as a legal professional. I want to talk about it as much as I can. In Canada so many people are still in jail because of marijuana-related crimes, and I want to help them.

Educate, educate, educate. You read something you disagree with? Research about it. That's all I have to say.

Amber: And there we have it, Larissa Balkissoon, our Kent Law Review essay competition winner telling us that education is the way forward. Thank you!