The Woman Who Invented Cannabis Tracking

Nine years ago, the idea of tracking cannabis from seed to sale was an outlandish notion. Then Jessica Billingsley came along.

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Jessica Billingsley believes that consumers want to know precisely what's in their weed and how those materials got there. Yet until relatively recently, it was difficult for cannabis producers and retailers to provide them with real, robust transparency — simply because of a lack of adequate tracking tools. That changed nine years ago, when a Colorado cannabis firm invited Billingsley, a tech entrepreneur, to invest in them and help them select their business software. Realizing that nothing on the market worked quite right for the unique supply chains and regulatory frameworks of the cannabis industry, she built something new. That project became what is now
MJ Platform, a seed-to-sale monitoring and regulatory compliance system.

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Billingsley put this in layman's terms: "If I had a gummy, I could tell you the farm on which the plants were grown, what was applied to them in the growing process, when they were harvested and where, when the dried plant was transferred to a manufacturing facility, and so on — not just for a batch of

plant, but for that particular gummy.”

The revolutionary transparency and utility Billingsley’s tech provides has made her a key figure in the world of cannabis industry ancillary services — and one of the nation’s top female entrepreneurs writ large. We recently spoke with Billingsley about her experiences leading the way in a still heavily male-dominated industry, her advice for other women in the space, and the future of her now public company, Akerna.

You’ve always pursued endeavors that aren’t considered stereotypically female. You were one of the few female students in your computer science program, for example. Why is that?

Maybe I’m just naturally countercultural? [*Laughs*] No. My parents were very progressive and tried to raise us without gender roles, with the thought that we could pursue anything we were drawn to in life.

But that’s something that bothers me in technology: There is actually a lower percentage of women in technology today than there was 25 years ago. Fifty-six percent of women who go into tech drop out in the first 10 years. I speculate there are some cultural barriers, and others related to family planning. But I’ve started a social campaign called the One Woman Challenge. The idea is that it doesn’t necessarily take much. The challenge is to help one woman in some way progress in her career in tech, whether through a phone call, an email, or a mentoring session.

How do you think the cannabis industry stacks up for women compared with other industries, and in general?

First, I’d like to debunk a number that was shared a handful of years ago about cannabis holding more opportunity for women. Someone reported that 30 percent of business leaders or owners in the industry were women. When you compare that with legacy businesses that have been around for ages, it compares

positively. But if you were to instead look at the percentage of women in cannabis leadership or ownership roles compared with traditional businesses started in the past 10 years, cannabis would underperform the mainstream. And our industry's numbers of women in leadership and ownership positions have been on the decline in the past couple of years.

I would hypothesize that this is not intentional or nefarious in nature. It is more systemic. As cannabis has grown quickly in recent years, it has been pulling talent from mainstream industries. That talent is just stacked predominately male, skewing the people available to interview. And because of that, you begin to get even more of that imbalance. So that's not great. A lot of work needs to be done to help reverse that trend. Part of that requires women to get men to buy into helping them. Every objective study ever conducted has found that diversity – certainly in gender, but diversity in general – is good for business. We have to start there, asking colleagues to buy into that premise and from there say: OK, how do we foster a culture of diversity and attract people with different viewpoints who can help us innovate and solve problems better?

Are you actively trying to promote diversity within your own company?

Yes, but it's more about focusing on developing a culture. We don't have quotas for diversity. When you join us, you're buying into a culture – it's not focused on what you look like but on your performance, how smart you are, and whether or not you are a good person. Our core values are: Do the right thing. Be part of the solution. Show people that you care. We focus a lot on what that really means and how to work together as a team to achieve it. And the result is that we have a phenomenally diverse company for the technology sector, for cannabis, and for the Denver area.

I think diversity breeds diversity in some ways as well.

People interested in a diverse workforce will be more likely to interview and open to working for a female CEO, for instance.

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Your company recently merged to form the publicly traded Akerna. How did that happen? And where is the company moving as you head into the future?

MJ Platform and MTech, the first special-purpose acquisition company listed on the NASDAQ for the purpose of acquiring a business ancillary to the cannabis industry, announced an intention to merge last October. The transaction successfully closed on June 17, 2019, and we formed Akerna, the leading cannabis technology provider and the first cannabis technology company to list on a major U.S. exchange. NASDAQ invited us to ring the bell – actually, there, it's pressing a button. It was a wonderful act of recognition, especially for my team. Everyone is really excited about the next chapter, the new frontier, and what we can do with this larger platform.

What does the next stage look like? How do we continue to innovate first, solve problems better than anyone else? How do we continue to scale responsibly, economically, correctly – always positioning ourselves just ahead of where the market is going so that we're meeting the needs of the vanguard and the early adopters, then being in position for what the bulk of the industry needs?

What advice would you give a woman who is curious about getting started in the industry?

We are building an industry that has never existed before. Despite some of the inherent inequalities in terms of the male-female ratio, there is a culture of inclusion and social equality built into that foundation. And the roots of the industry come out of the counterculture. That means that

people are more willing to help [than they are in many other industries today]. There are lots of wonderful people in the industry, male and female, who would be absolutely delighted to give you 10 minutes of their time, or point you in the right direction toward lists and resources in an email. You will find us, as an industry, as a whole, to be open and welcoming and likely to give you a hand up.

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