

Faces of pot: The grower

Mark Gobuty is at the helm of a company that is genetically testing marijuana plants to create ailment-specific strains for a new commercial market.



Mark Gobuty's Peace Naturals Project is a federally licensed and regulated commercial medical cannabis grower producing and distributing medical pot in Canada.

By: Isabel Teotonio Living reporter, Published on Fri Jan 17 2014

Mark Gobuty stands in the middle of a crop of plants with names such as Happy Face, Sweet Dreams and Holy Grail.

Wearing a white lab coat and hard hat, he looks part-scientist and part-construction worker. It seems fitting for someone building a company that is genetically testing marijuana plants to create ailment-specific strains.

The former health food producer began growing medical marijuana for his parents in 2011, inside a century-old barn, nestled in the rolling farmland of Clearview Township, south of Georgian Bay.

That “adventure” evolved into The Peace Naturals Project, a federally licensed producer among the first companies approved by Health Canada to distribute medical cannabis under new regulations introduced in October that take full effect on April 1.

“There’s an opportunity to shape an industry,” says Gobuty of what motivated him to get in early and set the standard on quality, message and pricing.

To date, Health Canada has received 404 applications to produce and distribute medical marijuana, 164 of them from Ontario. Four licences have been granted to: CanniMed Ltd., Mettrum Ltd., Bedrocan Canada Inc. and The Peace Naturals Project Inc.

Under the new regulations, medicinal users can no longer grow their own pot, nor will the government sell it. Instead, a burgeoning free market of licensed growers will cultivate and sell standardized quality weed at competitive prices to patients with a doctor’s prescription. Marijuana can be prescribed for the management and treatment of symptoms and ailments, including HIV, chronic pain and appetite stimulation.

Currently there are about 37,500 licensed medicinal users in Canada. But based on the rate of growth in previous years, that number is expected to hit 450,000 by 2024, with projections of \$1.3 billion per year in annual sales, according to Health Canada.

The new law has sparked outrage from some users and a federal lawsuit alleging it violates the constitutional rights of patients because it strips them of the ability to grow. Users fear market prices will be too costly, when compared with \$1 to \$4 a gram it costs to grow it themselves. It’s estimated commercial prices may run as high as \$12 a gram. The Peace Naturals Project is selling cannabis for \$6 a gram; \$3 for those on disability allowance.

For users, costs add up because, unlike other medication, cannabis doesn't have a drug identification number, meaning drug plans won't cover it. However, Veterans Affairs pays for it and WSIB covers it in some cases.

Many are also concerned that, come April 1, the market won't be ready to meet the demand. Gobuty admits there's a risk of that, but is confident the market will catch up.

Currently, there's a glut of pot on the street, selling at record-low prices so licensed producers could face stiff competition from street dealers.

Gobuty's journey to pot producer started three years ago, after peeking inside his parents' medicine cabinet. He was stunned by all the pain medications they were taking for severe arthritis and other ailments.

After discussing the idea with his brothers, Gobuty offered to grow pot. He had learned about growing cannabis from a friend who is the largest industrial hemp producer in the world. He hoped to lure his 70-something snowbird parents back home from California so they could spend time with the grandkids.

His parents agreed and, as Gobuty puts it, "the adventure began."

The benefits of cannabis became evident when he saw his father's agility improve and pain decrease.

"We saw immediate results, as in the first time he smoked cannabis," he recalls. "His dexterity was night and day."

In the mornings, his father's hands were so stiff from the arthritis that he couldn't type on a keyboard or hold a pen. But 15 minutes after smoking pot, his agility could rival that of a piano player, Gobuty says.

Marijuana made his father, who is also a cancer survivor, less dependent on pain pills and alcohol, which he had used to numb the pain.

"We got him off the treadmill, so to speak," says Gobuty. "(He) was much happier and much more engaged with my children and could genuinely contribute to what we were doing in the production facility.... He thrived."

Gobuty's mother didn't experience the same benefits. She never fully embraced hew new medicine — in part because she didn't like the idea of consuming marijuana.

At the time, growing pot was simply a passion. Gobuty's full-time job was running Mum's Original, a wholesome food company, with his wife, Ann Barnes.

Then, in the summer of 2012, he came across an article he called a game changer. It was about Tikun Olam, an Israeli company that created a strain of non-intoxicating marijuana by removing THC (tetrahydrocannabinol), which has psychoactive properties, and increasing the amount of CBD (cannabidiol), an active ingredient that doesn't make a person high.

Two weeks later Gobuty hopped a plane to visit a nursing home in an Israeli kibbutz whose residents were using that marijuana.

The patients, who included Holocaust survivors and PTSD sufferers, experienced decreased levels of anxiety and opiate consumption. Patient-family visits increased.

“It truly touched my soul,” says Gobuty. “I heard stories from the nurses and caregivers, with respect to people coming in, literally, so anxious and upset that they would have to be tied down to a bed. ... Three, four days later these same people were sitting at the lunch room table, relaxed and eating.... It created stability and that was extraordinary.

“That was really the genesis of where we took off from,” Gobuty says. “I came back from that first trip to Israel and said ‘We have to teach people that this is the new cannabis and this is what's possible.’ ”

In the fall of 2012, he incorporated The Peace Naturals Project, amid rumbling that federal regulations would be changing and a new industry emerging. He left Mum's Original, which his wife still runs, to focus on the new venture.

Gobuty spent a considerable amount of time educating local authorities and community members about his plans. But, he notes, “There wasn't the shock factor, maybe that's a sign of the times.” In November, his company was licensed and opened for business. Among the 29 employees are people

who answer client calls, work in the growing facility and manage the property.

That old barn is now filled with about 1,000 marijuana plants. There are plans to introduce greenhouses and expand the facility. From the road, the 38-hectare property looks like a hobby farm, with a barn and house, now used as an office and call centre. It's only when visitors get well up the driveway that it becomes apparent this isn't an ordinary farm.

Barbed-wire fencing surrounds the barn, which is protected by cameras, motion sensors and glass-break detectors. All employees wear a panic button connected to the Ontario Provincial Police in the event of trouble.

Researchers measure the plants' active ingredients daily to ensure they produce a consistent medicine. Currently, they're selling 14 varieties of marijuana, two of which have high levels of CBD, meaning they won't make a person high but will medicate pain. Two full-time researchers are testing 105 additional strains, and studying genetic differences in the plants in an effort to produce ailment-specific strains.

Because pharmacists did not want to dispense medical marijuana, patients must contact the grower directly to fill their prescription, which is then shipped directly to them in a smell-proof and tamper-evident package.

Gobuty is in talks with local nursing homes about introducing cannabis and has offered to provide vapourizers so residents can inhale the marijuana, rather than smoke it, which is more harmful.

“What I saw (in Israel) was great dignity and the most compassionate application of medicine I had ever seen... I want to bring that here.”