

# FOREWORD

*By Kevin Sabet*

Having become a parent for the first time in 2019, my little girl is now my whole world. I cannot fathom what Laura and John must have gone through on November 20, 2019. While I was at home getting to know my then two-week-old, Laura and John were going through unimaginable anguish.

That is why what the Stacks have done to honor Johnny in a short year with Johnny's Ambassadors is nothing short of extraordinary. Determined to teach all of America her son's name, Laura—a force of nature—has transformed her grief into action in her home state of Colorado and across the country and indeed, the world.

And action we need. Badly.

Since the Mile High State took its nickname quite literally in 2012—as a result of a multimillion-dollar financed referendum based primarily on untruths—the state has suffered. In Colorado, pot retail locations outnumber all McDonald's and Starbucks locations combined—promoting a culture of normalization.

And this has had consequences: In Colorado, the number of marijuana-related emergency department visits increased 54 percent from 2013 to 2017, according to the state health department. Yearly marijuana-related hospitalizations increased 101 percent in that same period. Calls to the poison control center for marijuana exposures also increased. In 2013, 125 calls were made for marijuana-related exposures. By 2018, that number jumped to 266, representing a 112.8 percent increase. Youth cases (instances of marijuana-related exposures of children aged eight or younger) increased 126.2 percent from 2013 to 2018. In 2018, youth cases represented over half of all marijuana-related exposure calls. All of this translates into money spent, yes, but also into lives ruined.

To add insult to injury, we know this is affecting small children, not just older teens. A study by the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment found that in 2018, over 23,000 homes in the state with children aged one to 14 years had marijuana products stored unsafely. In 2018, 60 percent of youth marijuana exposures involved edibles, compared with just 18 percent in 2016. Even when packaging is compliant with Colorado's regulatory requirements, it fails to discourage or prevent children from accessing potent and dangerous marijuana.

Childproof packaging and warning labels don't seem to be helping. The state's Regional Center for Poison Control and Prevention (RPC) recorded a 140 percent increase in marijuana exposures, and the drug was cited in 23 percent of Colorado school suspensions, the highest of all documented school offenses. Further, between 2012 and 2014, the percentage of 10- to 14-year-olds who once or twice tested positive for THC increased from 19 percent to 23 percent; those who tested positive three or more times increased from 18 percent to 25 percent. There are

countless other statistics about increasing numbers of car crashes related to THC intoxication, workplace dangers, and targeting of vulnerable and minority communities in the state.

But I am hopeful for the future. Because of advocacy from Laura and other like-minded groups, decision makers—for the first time—are now contemplating a limit on the amount of THC that can be sold in the state. Capping potency rates would be a much-needed game-changer that would save lives.

This doesn't mean users should be jailed. While we should remove criminal penalties for use, expunge records, and invest in prevention and treatment, the legalization of marijuana has become akin to mass commercialization, or as I like to say, addiction for profit. Scientific literature on the harms of marijuana use exists in abundance. According to the National Academies of Sciences, there are over 20,000 peer-reviewed research articles linking marijuana use to severe mental health outcomes ranging from depression to psychosis, as well as consequences for physical health and brain development, among other risks. These are often lost in conversations about legalization.

Also lost is the role of a new, commercialized industry that makes money off heavy users. Like the alcohol and tobacco industries, marijuana makes most of its money from the one in four users who consume more than 80 percent of the product, according to a state of Colorado study. The industry, then, has an incentive to promote heavy use. This is not about “casual” marijuana smoking by the otherwise non-using adult. This is about garnering lifelong customers and starting them young. Remember Joe Camel?

No one knows what the 2020s will bring in terms of pot policy. One thing for sure is that the Mad Men of Marijuana will continue to work hard to addict you and your kids. We've been

tricked by other industries before. You know the saying, “Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me.”

Laura and Johnny’s Ambassadors will help all of us navigate these tricky waters and ensure none of us are fooled, no matter what policies get passed in DC or our state capitals. After all, parents have more influence on a child’s decision to use—to do anything, really—than anyone else, including more than siblings, peers, teachers, or celebrities. I think we parents sometimes underestimate this awesome responsibility. We think, *Why would my child listen to me?* The truth is, they do.

Laura, through her powerful, moving, timely journey, can teach us all quite a lot. This book is a treasure.

**Kevin A. Sabet, Ph.D.**

President, Smart Approaches to Marijuana (SAM)

Author, *Smokescreen: What the Marijuana Industry Doesn’t Want You to Know*