

From police stops to marijuana executives: The long journey for owners of Boston's first pot shop

Pure Oasis is the state's first marijuana store established under a state program to aid people who were unfairly targeted by the war on drugs

By [Naomi Martin](#) Globe Staff, Updated March 6, 2020, 2 hours ago



Pure Oasis co-owners Kobie Evans, left, and Kevin Hart overcame many challenges to become the first economic empowerment applicants to open a pot store in the state, and the first cannabis shop in Boston, slated to open Monday. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

After the television news crew left, Kobie Evans unpacked a case of wood Ikea shelves and started drilling. In a few days, he expected thousands of people to flock to [Monday's planned grand opening](#) of Pure Oasis, Boston's first cannabis store — and the first owned by people enrolled in a program designed to ensure that some of legalization's windfall benefits communities that were hardest hit by the war on drugs.

The plants were potted and hung. The glass cases were filled with sleek jars of Nordic Goddess cannabis-infused lotion. And the marijuana had arrived, giving the remodeled Dorchester space the distinct aroma of floral-skunk mixed with freshly stained wood.

“Depending upon where the second hand is on the clock, it's either we're excited, or we're overwhelmed, or we're anxious,” Evans said.



Pure Oasis employees move shipment boxes to prepare for the store's opening day Monday. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

But the stress wasn't just over the store's opening. It was also about the responsibility that Evans and his business partner feel to help other disadvantaged cannabis

entrepreneurs succeed.

The road here has been long for Evans, 48, a real estate agent, and his co-owner, Kevin Hart, 45, a hospital director of operations. Their journey illustrates the promise and potential pitfalls of Massachusetts' ambitious plan to use marijuana as a tool to rectify societal inequities.

So far, 18 of more than 300 pot licenses awarded in Massachusetts have gone to people in the state's economic empowerment or social equity programs, which offer training and faster reviews for people from areas with high marijuana arrest rates. Hart and Evans will be the first economic empowerment applicants to open.

The two friends hatched the idea to open a cannabis store in August 2016 over beers at Slade's, one of Boston's oldest Black-owned businesses. They had just returned from Washington, D.C., where they noticed more people of color seemed financially successful than in Boston.



Pure Oasis co-owner Kobie Evans assembled Ikea shelves to hold pot products in Boston's first marijuana store, slated to open Monday. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

Evans was following the campaign to legalize marijuana. The law sought to ensure the industry would financially benefit the communities who [bore the brunt of marijuana arrests](#), which were disproportionately Black, Latino, and low-income.

“We have this weed thing coming down the pipeline,” Evans recalled saying. “Some people are going to be able to take advantage of it.” Then it dawned on him and Hart: “Wait a minute — we *are* those guys.”

So in 2018, they applied for the economic empowerment program. As Black men, they each had experienced being targeted by police and the resulting fear, anger, and trauma.

When Evans was a teenager, he said, he was walking to visit friends in his old Dorchester neighborhood, Uphams Corner. Suddenly someone grabbed him, lifted him, and slammed him into a metal storefront gate, making a loud clang.

Turning his head, Evans said, he prepared to brawl. But then he saw that the man rifling through his pockets was a police officer.

“My adrenaline was rushing,” Evans recalled. “But you’re not going to fight the police, so you just surrender.”

Evans said he feared the police after that. He tried marijuana, but never loved it.

When Hart was a sophomore at Morgan State University in Baltimore, he and two friends were arrested for smoking pot in a dorm room.

“Have you ever been to jail?” Hart remembered the officer asking.

“No,” Hart replied.

“Well, you’re going tonight,” the officer said.

Hart was scared. “It almost seemed like he was hoping I would say ‘no’ so he could be the first one to make me experience jail,” he recalled.

After being locked up, Hart said, he resolved to avoid trouble — and marijuana. His misdemeanor possession charge thwarted him during job applications. He moved to Boston, had the record expunged, and earned a master’s in business administration.

With legalization, Hart and Evans wanted to seize the chance the state was offering people like them.

“This was a business opportunity coupled with a social experiment,” Evans said. “Boston is a tremendous city that generates billions of dollars worth of revenue. The vast majority of that money does not touch the inner cities. This was a project to see if we could change that.”

Starting out, they had no idea what they faced.

They couldn't afford the [consultants that wealthy companies hired](#) to navigate the labyrinth of local and state approvals. Evans mastered the industry, studying other states' marijuana retail applications online.

Real estate was the first hurdle. Evans and Hart wanted their store to be downtown, but no brokers called Evans back, likely skittish about pot's federal illegality.

They turned their focus to Dorchester, Evans's longtime home. He knew a landlord with vacant space, a former furniture shop, in the Grove Hall neighborhood.



Workers prepared Pure Oasis, at 430 Blue Hill Ave., for its opening slated for Monday as Boston's first marijuana store. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

The next step was securing a contract with the city, which is a requirement before applying for a state license. Evans applied with the city in late 2018. A few months later, he was approved.

That initial smooth process turned out to be an anomaly. Many other pot businesses, especially smaller ones that can't afford to [offer municipalities extra payments](#), have [stalled](#) while waiting for local approvals. Pure Oasis is now in that limbo for its two other planned stores in Medford and Mattapan, where it has paid \$5,500 and \$3,000 in monthly rent, respectively, for a year.

Evans and Hart learned other lessons. Last summer, they delayed construction for three months, awaiting a city permit that turned out not to be necessary.

Pure Oasis needed \$150,000 to build out the Dorchester store. Neither Evans nor Hart had rich relatives, but one day, they got lucky: One of Evans's family friends was looking to invest a hefty sum.

Shortly afterward, a large cannabis company invited Hart and Evans to dinner. Over expensive wine and plates of octopus and pâté, the company offered to fund Pure Oasis. In exchange, Hart and Evans would essentially become employees of the other corporation, [losing control](#) over their shops through a [management contract](#). They declined the offer.

“If we didn't have access to capital, that could've worked,” Hart said. “They were offering what we needed — all you'd need to do is sell your soul.”

Now, both men are excited to see their hard work finally pay off.

When Pure Oasis opens, on Blue Hill Avenue, police details and staff will ensure the sidewalks stay clear and address traffic, parking, and illegal consumption of pot in public.



Pure Oasis's display cabinets of marijuana flower, ashtrays, and lotion. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

Even so, Ed Gaskin, executive director of Greater Grove Hall Main Streets, said the city should have required Pure Oasis to commit to specific donations for the neighborhood.

“We wanted to make sure we got something in return for the loss of parking, additional traffic congestion, etc.,” Gaskin said in an e-mail. “Our worst fear is the cannabis business would be like the liquor stores that generate problems for the community such as substance abuse.”

Evans and Hart said their goal is to lift up their community. They hired 40 people, largely from the area and some with criminal records, and chose local minority contractors. They plan to donate to local groups working on poverty-related issues. They anticipate economic benefits, too, as their customers visit nearby businesses.



Viondy Merisma, director of security, sets up an entry line for Pure Oasis, Boston's first cannabis store, slated to open Monday. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

Amid the preparations at Pure Oasis this week, a street vendor wheeled in a cart laden with juice, fruit, and salad. Evans, Hart, and a half-dozen workers purchased lunch from him. The man, Ses Kelly, said he planned to sell to people waiting in line at Pure Oasis, and pointed to Evans.

“Big respect for him,” Kelly said in his Virgin Islands accent. “He did something real good for the community.”

Then Evans and Hart returned to work. They still needed to assemble those Ikea shelves.

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