INTERVIEWER: This is Janet Bishop, and I'm here for my second session with Wanda James at the Simply Pure Dispensary in Denver, Colorado. This is for the Stories of Amendment 64 Oral History Project at Colorado State University. The date is May 18th, 2016. And Wanda, thank you so much again for sitting with us for this oral history project. I know there were some sad things with your dog going on last time, as well as business as usual at the dispensary happening. But quickly, because I know you do have a busy schedule later on this afternoon, I want to wrap up just a bit about your early professional goals, and your life in California. And what led you to be a restaurateur.

When we last left off, you were in your 20s. You were in L.A. You had worked for corporate America with Fasson and with Avery Label Company. And you talked, interestingly enough, about combining the paradox of working for corporate America with your desire for social justice, and for righting some of the wrongs of society. You spoke-- just in brief, because we didn't have time-- about your circle of friends, who were of similar mind with you. Could you just elaborate a little bit, and I imagine this will lead to getting to the restaurant business, ultimately. And let's place a date. So this is about 1991?

WANDA JAMES: 1991. It was right around the time of the riots and Rodney King, and L.A. was exploding. And my group of friends were these amazing young people. Some were lawyers, some were entrepreneurs, some worked for corporate America. And we were smack dab in the middle of what was happening in the news all over the United States. L.A. was erupting. Erupting everywhere. And through all of that unrest, there was this amazing group of people that came together-- socially and politically and business wise-- that we just really wanted to make a difference in Los Angeles. And so we started making our voice heard politically through organizations like the New Leaders. Some of them became speakers, and just different types of things.

Through all of this in Los Angeles, I had met Scott one evening. We were out at a bar in Los Angeles, and I met this good looking guy. And Scott and I had instant attraction, and we were together from the minute that we met. I met Scott when I was 31.

INTERVIEWER: And Scott is?

WANDA JAMES: My husband.
INTERVIEWER: Husband now. And Scott's last name, just for the record, is?

WANDA JAMES: Durrah.

INTERVIEWER: It's Durrah.

WANDA JAMES: D-U-R-R-A-H.

INTERVIEWER: And so, great attraction. Were you still working for corporate America?

WANDA JAMES: I was. Well, I had actually left Fasson and Avery at the time, and I started working for-- No, still: I was still at Avery at the time when I met Scott. So we had met. And I don't know really how long-- and he and I had have asked ourselves this-- but at some point after meeting Scott, within the next year or so, we had the opportunity to buy a little restaurant in Santa Monica called the Jamaican Cafe. It was owned by some Jamaican friends of Scott's, who unfortunately were divorcing and no longer wanted the business. And they had asked Scott, would you want to buy the restaurant? And we agreed to buy the restaurant. And I believe our first restaurant cost us, like, $75,000.

And we bought this little restaurant. We funded it the best way that we could, and we turned it into what I think was an amazing little beach-side restaurant, with lots of celebrity clientele. And it was a lot of fun. And from the restaurant, that led into being more politically active, because now we're business owners. And I had the opportunity to run for political office when I was about-- I think I was 32, maybe 33. Maybe. The congressman that we had just elected in the neighborhood suddenly died a month after the election, and there was a special election.

INTERVIEWER: And this was in Santa Monica?

WANDA JAMES: This was in California, in Leimert Park. Leimert Park, Baldwin Hills. And there were, I think, 19 or 18 people that ran for Congress in that seat. And there was a lot of folks, and we were young and ambitious and in our thoughts, and it was just an amazing time. I think everybody in America should run for office once in their life.

INTERVIEWER: So to place this in the historic time, this was 1990--

WANDA JAMES: This would have been '93, maybe? No, it would have been a little more than '93, would have been, like, 90-- Geez.

INTERVIEWER: I know it's vexing to ask.

WANDA JAMES: There's a lot of years back here I'm trying to recount. I guess it would've been more '94 or '95, because I would've been about 31 or 32 at the time.

INTERVIEWER: And so you had the restaurant in Santa Monica. You were working with your husband. What inspired you, other than your drive for social justice? Was there anything special about this runoff, or this special election? Was there anything-- any special issues?
WANDA JAMES: You know what, there was no special issues. I mean, it was a congressional seat in California, which, for us, was just a huge undertaking. And once again, the ability to start to have people focus on the things that we thought would matter. I don't want to divert, because I keep doing this, but it's interesting now--

INTERVIEWER: It's oral history.

WANDA JAMES: Watching younger people in their 30s wanting the same thing. That's what we're seeing with Bernie. And I know it's a lot of other people, but wanting a change. Wanting something different. And it was that same kind of drive that was happening in the '90s. We were just on the other side of the riots, we were just on the other side of Rodney King. It was a very difficult time. The police chief was just removed. I mean, it was really just the other side of the turmoil. And so, in order to stop any more turmoil from ever happening, it was up to young people to take over. And we were going to take over, because we had the answers, and the older people didn't. So I think there was just that kind of a feel, of wanting to run for office.

INTERVIEWER: And was your husband your campaign manager?

WANDA JAMES: No, we had a professional campaign manager, and everybody else. My husband was my-- So through this process of running for office, I ended up starting-- on the other side of running for office-- starting James Foxx Communications, which was a political communications firm that I kept busy for almost the last 10 or 15 years. In doing communications for various members of Congress, and city council members, and different things. Running a few campaigns. But my husband-- and what I would tell people years later as a campaign manager-- I have to meet with the husband and the wife, because they're both running for office. Whether it's the wife running or the spouse. Whoever it may be. But it's the whole family, because the whole family will have to be a support unit. And so my husband was very much a part of that campaign. Especially being our first campaign.

INTERVIEWER: Not to trivialize, but sort of like The Good Wife, if you've ever seen that TV show.

WANDA JAMES: Yes. I mean, definitely, they got to be there. They got to be there.

INTERVIEWER: So there is another question about James Foxx. So you were starting this communications company simultaneously, or in conjunction with running for office?

WANDA JAMES: Well, after I ran for office--

INTERVIEWER: And how did that turn out?

WANDA JAMES: Oh, I don't know. I mean, it wasn't disastrous. It was amazing. Lots of name recognition. But not even close to winning. Diane Watson won the seat, who was the first black female senator in California, and then went on to be Congresswoman. It was deservedly a good person for that seat. I don't know remember where I fell out in the 18 people that ran. I don't know. Number 11 or something. It wasn't impressive, but it was a lot of fun to be a part of.
So after the run-- And having met everybody, and tremendous name recognition, and people asking me to do their communications because I was a good speaker-- so even working with Diane Watson on some of her communications after the fact-- so James Foxx Communications became my political consulting arm. Of which, over the years, we did communications work for Karen Bass, who eventually became Speaker of the House. Raised money for Bernard Parks, who was a former police chief and then became a city council member. And just numerous initiatives and different things that we were always involved in, politically and from a social justice standpoint.

INTERVIEWER: And the name James Foxx?

WANDA JAMES: James Foxx is my mother and my father's names. So had my mother and my father been given the same opportunities in life, they would have had an amazing company called James Foxx. So I just wanted them to have that company.

INTERVIEWER: OK. So you're running for office, running the restaurant, then started the communications company. Were you involved a lot in the restaurant as you started to build the communications company?

WANDA JAMES: No, Scott did a lot of the-- I mean, Scott has always been about the food and the cheffing. And so, he definitely runs the restaurant side and the business side on that aspect.

INTERVIEWER: OK, and so, tell me a little bit about how you got from your restaurant business to-- because here you are in Denver--

WANDA JAMES: To the weed business?

INTERVIEWER: For when you got to weed.

WANDA JAMES: How'd you get off of the beach in California and end up in Denver selling weed? How'd that happen? After all this happened, I thought that my career was going to be in politics, because it was where my passion lied. So I wanted to go to George Washington University and get my MBA in campaign management. About a month before we were going to-- it was probably more than a month, probably about six, seven months-- we decided to move to DC. And Scott surprised me with a trip back to CU Boulder. It was my 20th anniversary of my graduation, I hadn't been back since I'd graduated. And so he surprised me with this weekend, and we came back, and Denver has changed dramatically in 20 years.

INTERVIEWER: And the year is?

WANDA JAMES: I would have left in 1986, so this would have been 1996.

INTERVIEWER: So you had been running the restaurant, building the communications James Fox, etc. And '96 comes, and you're headed to Washington DC.
WANDA JAMES: Actually, no, this wasn't '96. Good Lord, this would've been-- we came here 2003. So this would have been-- I'm forgetting a whole bunch of years in between here-- this would have been 2002, 2003.

INTERVIEWER: So in '96, you ran.

WANDA JAMES: Yes, '96 we ran, then we had the restaurant up until '99, 2000. And then we had James Foxx communications. And then Scott broke off-- I forgot about this part. So Scott, also in owning the restaurant, Scott's also a property manager. He's a high rise property manager, is what he'd been doing for a bunch of years. So his company blew up into a number of contracts, so he was running two high rises in Los Angeles. And then I was running James Foxx Communications. We had closed the restaurant because of a lot of the construction that had gone on around the area that we were at, so we just closed it at that time and went on to--

INTERVIEWER: You wanted to leave that area.

WANDA JAMES: Yes, and we knew we were going to be leaving California and going to DC, so all of that happened. Wow, you guys are making me remember my whole life. It's, like, oh my goodness.

INTERVIEWER: I know, it's a blessing or a curse. And just to interject, it sounded like you both had that entrepreneurial, energetic gene.

WANDA JAMES: Scott's been an entrepreneur his whole life, he's never worked for anybody. He's always had his own businesses. And I think he trained me to be an entrepreneur, or unlocked the ability for me to be an entrepreneur.

INTERVIEWER: Correct me if I'm wrong, is he from Jamaica?

WANDA JAMES: No, he's from Boston. He's half Italian and grew up in Boston. He spent most of his 20s traveling the islands, and fell in love with Jamaica, and spent significant amount of his formative years in Jamaica.

INTERVIEWER: OK, that's where I got the connection. OK, so now we're almost at the turn of the century.

WANDA JAMES: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: And--

WANDA JAMES: And significantly what happens at this point, in 2009, my father passed away, which is when I met my brother Rick. And my brother was the first person I'd met that had actually been arrested and done time for cannabis.

INTERVIEWER: So we're jumping forward--
WANDA JAMES: 2099-- I mean, 1999.

INTERVIEWER: OK, so your brother got arrested before you came back for your 20th?

WANDA JAMES: Oh yes. So I had not met my brother until 1999 at my father's funeral, but we had learned about him earlier in the year, in January of 1999. And unfortunately my father passed away before he had a chance to meet him. But Rick and I had been in contact, and we had spoken quite a bit. I was fascinated by-- or saddened or pissed off by-- his story. I mean, the idea that somebody actually went to prison for cannabis, for four ounces. It was unreal to me. I didn't think that actually happened in this world, because none of my friends had ever been arrested for cannabis at all. I mean, never even been harassed over cannabis.

So that became the piece, that when we started to look at-- the overcrowding of L.A. jails was due to nonviolent drug offenders. And a lot of the organizations that we belonged to in Los Angeles started addressing the overcrowding of the L.A. jails, and the police brutality, and those things that were happening at that same time. So all of that kind of led into, then, the understanding of what was happening in America with nonviolent drug arrests. Or cannabis, as we now know it to be true.

So when Scott surprised me with a trip back to Colorado, we decided to move to Colorado in 2004. We got here in October of 2004. I immediately met Jay Fawcett at the beginning of 2005, and began running his campaign down in Colorado Springs. Lieutenant Colonel Jay Fawcett ran for Congress in CD5 against the now Congressman Lamborn. We had an amazing run. I got to bring all of my California politics to a little county called El Paso. And I still contend we would have beat them if the Denver Post did not run a story, front page above the fold-- headline-- that El Paso County, that the Democrat was polling 50-50 with the Republican person that was running-- Doug Lamborn, at the time-- if you know anything about the politics of El Paso County, it's the antithesis of Boulder. So the idea that a Democrat is even in the game in El Paso County set the Republicans off on a tailspin. They lost their minds and spent a million dollars on mailers in two weeks against my candidate.

INTERVIEWER: Because we do have some time, I'm going to back up just a second. Because-- and we'll hold the thought about El Paso County-- but it sounds like when your husband gave you the gift of the trip to Boulder, you were headed to DC. And so just to fill in a little bit of the blank here, so that trip to DC-- that moving to DC and George Washington never happened.

WANDA JAMES: It didn't happen. And we got to Boulder and it'd been a long time, and I've always loved Boulder. I loved my experience there, it's always been near and dear to my heart, and I keep it close to me all the time. I have little buffaloes all over the place, on our new mural outside has a little buffalo on it. So CU has always been near and dear to my heart. And having been gone for 20 years, and then come back, and just to be at the Boulderado, and to be back on Pearl Street, and to come over that hill and-- I mean, I got emotional. When I came over the hill, I just started crying. And Scott's, like, what's wrong with you? And I'm, like, it's just so beautiful. Because it's just breathtaking if you haven't seen it for so long, you know?
And it was the complete opposite of what L.A. was at the time. And we were tired of L.A. We'd been in L.A. for 17 years, we were now 40 not 27. There was no traffic, there was no smog, people were pleasant. I mean, there were no fake boobs. I mean, it was amazing, it was just-- it was terrific. So we were like, you know what? We can do this. So to let's come back to Colorado.

INTERVIEWER: Had you been accepted in the Master's program?

WANDA JAMES: I was in the process of applying.

INTERVIEWER: OK, so you took your earnings and settled in Boulder proper?

WANDA JAMES: In Boulder. So we bought a house. It was really funny, because when we were there, we came back the following weekend. I think we found our house in Boulder in a week and a half. Came back to L.A., we put our house on the market on a Thursday morning. It was sold by Saturday for-- it was sold.

INTERVIEWER: For a pretty penny.

WANDA JAMES: It was the L.A. boom at that time, so that made leaving a lot easier.

INTERVIEWER: And this was late nineties.

WANDA JAMES: No, this must've been 2003. 2004.

INTERVIEWER: 2004. So we've covered the late 90s with your restaurant experience in Santa Monica. By the way, this is relevant to later political work. Could you just summarize, in a minute or two, what was your platform when you were running for the Los Angeles seat in California?

WANDA JAMES: I think at that point, I was running-- It's funny, I think a lot of it was once again desire for social justice. Because I had just-- and the idea of experience. So as a former military officer, I was a vet. I was a corporate executive. And my last job in corporate-- actually, when did I take my last job? So I contracted with Southern California Presbyterian Homes, to help them with some of their marketing when I was part of James Foxx. So being able to work in the senior community, and understanding senior issues. So I think that those were the things I'd taken a look at, was just the idea of experience. Understanding senior issues, social justice, and understanding business and being a business owner.

INTERVIEWER: And social justice also pertained to race relations.


INTERVIEWER: OK, so thank you. And now we're back in Boulder. And one other question, though. You had mentioned you were adopted, so the brother you met who was incarcerated for marijuana, that was a brother from your--
INTERVIEWER: Your dad who you--

WANDA JAMES: When I say my dad, I've only known my one father my entire life, who has been my-- he was my adoptive father, but he was my dad. I've never met my biological father, I've known my one father.

INTERVIEWER: OK, so he was from your biological father?

WANDA JAMES: No, my adoptive father.

INTERVIEWER: OK. But you hadn't met your brother. You hadn't met him before.

WANDA JAMES: No.

INTERVIEWER: All right, I think we've--

WANDA JAMES: I have four brothers. So I have four brothers. So Rick we did not know about until, like I said, early 1999. At that time he was already-- he was born in '79, so he'd have been what? 20 years old? 21 years old at that point. And then I have three other brothers. I have my oldest brother, who is my mother and my father's child-- my adoptive mother and my adoptive father's child-- my brother. And then I have two younger brothers from my father's second marriage. And then Rick is in the middle of the three of us.

INTERVIEWER: So with that all wrapped, we'll place you back in Boulder. I know you're continuing with James Foxx Communications at the time. And so you've moved to Boulder, there you are back home. What happens next?

WANDA JAMES: So I told Scott when we left L.A.-- I think at the time in L.A., I sat on the Starlight Foundations board, I sat on the Black Chamber of Commerce Board, I sat on the Los Angeles City Commission for Small Business. So we sat on all of these boards and commissions and different things. So the goal of coming back to Colorado was to slow life down and take things easy. And I ended up going to a breakfast or a luncheon for political women while I was in Boulder, and I met the chair of the party. Why have I just forgot Pat's name? Pat [INAUDIBLE]-- It'll come to me in a second. And Dottie Lamm. And that's when they had told me that Jay Fawcett was looking for a campaign manager, and I met Jay. And so I took on Jay Fawcett's campaign early in 2005, for the 2006 election. After Jay Fawcett, I worked on a number of campaigns, and then had met the then-senator Barack Obama. And I started doing fundraising for Obama for America, where I ended up on the Colorado finance committee. And then on to the President's National Finance Committee.

INTERVIEWER: So in 2007, 2008?

WANDA JAMES: 2008.
INTERVIEWER: So Jay Fawcett you had started to mention. Presumably he was a democratic candidate, and this was--

WANDA JAMES: Congressman Lamborn, Doug Lamborn. He ended up winning.

INTERVIEWER: He ended up winning over Jay Fawcett. So your work with then-senator Obama which morphed into-- could you tell me a little about it? And is there a connection-- and Wanda will joke-- where does the weed or marijuana connection come in, or was that even later on? And were you aware of-- because right about that time, there would've been movement within Colorado, with the folks there-- Vicente Sederberg, and Mason Tvert-- to legalize marijuana. So were you aware of that?

WANDA JAMES: Yes, absolutely. Absolutely. I'm not even sure when I met Mason and Brian and Christian. I've known them for a long time. So at some point in all of this political ballyhoo, we had met. And I honestly just cannot remember when I met them. But some point during the 2007-2008 piece, I was also Congressman Jared Polis's campaign manager. He went on to win his seat.

So coming off of 2008, I remember Jared and I traveling-- you have to go through all the mountain towns-- and I remember talking to Jared a lot about cannabis, and him feeling like this is the time, that it's definitely going to happen. We talked about what his positions would be when he was elected. And at the time, Jared asked, what do you think? It will be 5, 10 years before this is legal? And I says, no, Jared. I says, in the next year, maybe two. But I says, this is going legal. And the conversation is, what are you going to do after the campaign? And I'm, like, once I'm not connected to a candidate-- which has been the first time in years that I was not connected to the candidate. At the end of the 2008 election, I wasn't working for the President, I wasn't working for a congressman, and I wasn't working on a campaign. Scott and I decided to come full bore, and opened up a dispensary for political reasons at the time. Obviously it's a good business model, so I don't want to sound coy, like we didn't know it was good business. And it was a good business model. It's a plant that both Scott and I are connoisseurs of, have always been, for many, many years of our life. But politically, when Eric Holder came out with the Ogden memo-- that says as long as you are within your state's legal guidelines, that we would not mess with you-- we had actually had conversations with Senator Barack Obama about cannabis, and what his feelings were.

INTERVIEWER: And what were then-Senator Obama's feelings?

WANDA JAMES: That you should not be going to jail for cannabis, and this should be something that should definitely not be a federal issue. I think he's known that for a very long time. I don't know, after you become president, how that changes or morphs. But I think we're seeing him get back now to what he actually believes about cannabis, because we're seeing his work-- right now, today-- on not going to prison for nonviolent drug offenses.

INTERVIEWER: And did you have any discussions-- and I know we're backtracking just a little bit, because I still have you in the mountains with Jared Polis, but backtracking to then-Senator Obama-- did you have any sense that he was of that mind because of a generational thing? He
was younger than many presidential candidates. Or because, I believe he had knowledge of recreational use of marijuana?

WANDA JAMES: Oh, yes. And he's open about that.

INTERVIEWER: Or because of the social justice issue? Or all of the above?

WANDA JAMES: You know what? I think for anybody-- And it's funny because Barack Obama is all of my friends. Being military, most of my friends are mixed race. Being military, most of my friends are probably raised-- a lot of them were two parent households-- but for the most part, our generation was, our parents in the 70s all got divorced. That's what they did. So most of us came from single parent households on one side the other. And most of my friends in that scenario were actually very bright. So a lot of my friends went to Ivy League colleges. Most of my friends went to college. So Barack Obama was my friends.

So I think when these conversations happened-- and, I mean, they weren't numerous, it's not like I was hanging out with Barack in Chicago-- but at fundraisers and stuff early on, he would speak openly about the war, and cannabis, and Gitmo. I mean, he was very clear about what he wanted to see change. And, like all people with cannabis in our generation that have used it for a long time, we know the reports are ridiculous. We know that Schedule 1 is a lie. We know that no medicinal value is a lie. I mean, we know that. And I don't think that that's lost on the president. But I think that once you become president, I think that there is a process that you must go through to lead the country into a system, or into a process of acceptance. And it takes a long time to move 300 million people in the direction you want them to go to.

INTERVIEWER: Very interesting. And yes, it seems like Senator-- President Obama reflects a lot of the new America in terms of multiculturalism.

WANDA JAMES: Well, you hear him talk about being pulled over by the cops. Our president was pulled over and harassed by the cops in his younger days. Our president has said that, you know, Trayvon Martin would have been his child. I mean, those things that are happening today are definitely not lost on a 50-year-old black man of biracial culture. I mean, the same conversations you and I had when we first talked. You would have to almost be-- well, I'll say it- - you almost have to be an idiot to be a person of color and not understand what's happening.

INTERVIEWER: But for the record--

WANDA JAMES: For the record--

[INTERPOSING VOICES]


INTERVIEWER: So, back to the mountains with Jared Polis.

WANDA JAMES: Yes, let's go back there.
INTERVIEWER: This is about 2008, perhaps?

WANDA JAMES: This would have been, yes, early 2008.

INTERVIEWER: So you had been talking to Jared Polis about legalization, and you predicted it would be sooner rather than later. And this is the same year that you and your husband started the dispensary?

WANDA JAMES: OK, so the dispensary would have actually started in 2009. We were having discussions about-- I think we had met with Brian and Mason during 2008, because we were ready to go in 2009, to open up the dispensary. So we knew that we were definitely going to move on that. And for us, like I said, it was definitely a political move. Because I had been vetted, at least I don't know how many times, to be in the room with the next president of the United States. I had been vetted as an officer when I was a young person. I'd been vetted through corporate America for God knows how many times. I've been vetted to be at all these events with Jared. I'd been up in Nantucket with the Democratic Senatorial Committee. So they have been vetting me my entire life, and Scott as well.

So we'd been in the press. We knew that there was no way they could come back and look at us with, like, disgust. Like, you guys are just potheads and criminals who want to sell weed. We knew that they'd have to take us seriously as minority people, faces of color, black faces in this industry. And it would give us an opportunity to talk about social justice in a way that America was not speaking about it in 2009.

INTERVIEWER: And so what was the-- for lack of a better term-- what was the scene like in Denver in 2009, starting a medical marijuana dispensary?

WANDA JAMES: Underground. Everybody wanted to keep their head down, and not talk about it. This was still a lot of the people that were coming from the underground marijuana movement, moving into owning the businesses. So many people were fearful, and they were fearful of even the people like myself, that wanted to bring attention to it. It was, like, no, don't do that, don't do that. We don't want them to know. And I have always been of the opposite opinion, that you are safest in the light than you are in the dark. Because you can beat me in the dark, and I have no way of showing it. In the light, you've really got to come at me with a bit more fairness and justice and right. So I've always brought the press in. Always.

I've always thought it was really important to be a voice, to speak out about what it is that you're doing. To talk about what my patients look like. You know what I mean? That my patients weren't 21-year-old snowboarders with mohawks, that they were 40-year-old women experiencing severe pain from breast cancer. They were a 65-year-old women going through menopausal type issues. They were older men with stomach cancer. They were 35-year-old guys with arthritis in the knees. I mean, these were our customers, or our patients, at the time.

So when we opened up the dispensary, it was the Apothecary of Colorado.

INTERVIEWER: And where was it located in Denver?
WANDA JAMES: At 1730 Blake Street, and we were in Suite 420. We were very proud of that. We were like, yes!

INTERVIEWER: Suite 420. Ah, yes, now I get it. Yes. It's after lunch.

WANDA JAMES: It's, like, why are you proud of that? It was Suite 420, and it was a big dispensary, so we took a quarter of the dispensary. Because Scott was making at the time, and experimenting with, infusing foods. So he was infusing simple things at the time, and then found out that you could infuse more complex stuff. So he started infusing olive oils and different types of cooking oils. And then there was this explosion of other chefs that were bringing edibles at the time. And in 2009, people would show up at your dispensary with all of their baked goods, and say, would you like to buy these? And we would taste them, and be like oh, that's really good, Yeah we'll buy those. I mean, rules and regulations were definitely nowhere near what they were today.

But we found that, in 2009, a quarter of our business was edibles. So we also owned a restaurant right down the street from the dispensary, it seems to be a thing with us. And Scott started doing cooking classes on Saturday mornings. So we had 75 people in a cooking class. And every time we did a cooking class, we had a cooking class and we had 75 people on wait list. It was unbelievable how many people wanted these classes.

INTERVIEWER: And this was cooking classes to create cannabis edibles.

WANDA JAMES: And that was at 8 Rivers, downtown, that we were doing that at the time.

INTERVIEWER: What was the city-- inspectors come to restaurants all the time to do inspections. Did you have inspectors?

WANDA JAMES: Well the restaurant itself had inspectors. It's a downtown restaurant, it was a big, good sized-- or medium sized restaurant. So, of course, we had the inspectors that came in for the regular restaurant. But there was no rules and regulations, no liquor license issues. The only thing we had to make sure of, that everybody in there was 21 years old. That was the only caveat that we had in 2009.

INTERVIEWER: And how did the media react? Did they understand the symbolic significance you being a woman of color?

WANDA JAMES: Definitely. I mean it was definitely touched on. So now it's this big explosion, right? So today, it's like everybody is talking about it. But back then, those that did the interviews were definitely talking about it. And I think that our first big interview was on MSNBC, Marijuana USA, which came out in December of 2010. And on that one, just as I am now, I was very, very open and very forthcoming on what I believed, where we were in the battle for cannabis. And even in 2010, I boldly said that there is nothing that the federal government is going to be able to do to stop this explosion.
And I was right. I got lots of phone calls from people saying, girl you crazy. You're going to jail, they're going to come get you. They're going to come wrap you up. You are in trouble now. And I was like, no, I'm not. I'm safer today than I was yesterday. I mean, it sets up a scenario to where you can't just come in here and start messing with me arbitrarily. It has to be for a real reason.

INTERVIEWER: But then going back to the federal level, which, of course, there's the tension of something being legal at the state level and illegal at the federal level. Did you feel secure because of where you were, in Colorado? Did you feel secure because you an inkling of knowledge of now President Obama? Or was this security just part of your basic personality as you've described yourself?

WANDA JAMES: So is it just being, like, overly egotistical and making this thing happen?

INTERVIEWER: No, no, no. Just how you've described yourself.

WANDA JAMES: No, I get you. It was all of that, to be honest with you. Part of how I feel as a person, I knew that when we did this, we did this politically. And from years of activism, I know that there's not risk without activism. I mean, I'm surprised at how many people think that Rosa Parks was just an accident, that there was a nice little black lady sitting on a bus who got arrested one day. That's not what happened. So I think when you are willing to step out and make change, of course, in the back of your head, you're, like, I'm a moving target right now. But that's OK.

Did I feel like I minimized the risk to the nth degree? Of course. I had two senators on speed dial, one congressman. And I'm not going to boldly say that the White House was on speed dial, they weren't. But had I been arrested, I would have definitely put into the press that a member of Obama's National Finance Committee has just been arrested. And the only black woman in Colorado has just been arrested. I mean, I don't know. That just seems like they'd have to really explain some stuff in real big detail after that happens, right?

So this is why, I think, that we felt really confident. And clearly, too, it was the time. I mean, would I have done this under George Bush? No. So I think it was definitely the time for that to happen. But I think with any movement, or any leadership piece that comes from people or masses, it's because of a time and a movement. Martin Luther King wouldn't have worked in the '30s. Each time we find the right time for a movement, and this was our time. Our collective time.

INTERVIEWER: And what was your relationship to other-- And just a quick question. So you were on President Obama's finance committee I'm assuming for a short while, not for the while you were a dispensary owner.

WANDA JAMES: Oh, no. I came off of his finance committee at the end of the election, I wasn't on--

INTERVIEWER: So yes. OK. And then to the question I was about to ask, what was your relationship to other dispensary owners in the area at the time?
WANDA JAMES: 2009, I think I've always had a good relationship with most folks. I mean, there are definitely some people-- and especially some of the Free the Weed crowd, that didn't want regulations, and we shouldn't have to regulate anything, it's God's plant, we should be able to sell it for free, and get it for free, and move it for free-- a lot of those folks didn't care for me. Because I clearly understand business, and I clearly understand that water bottle you have right there is regulated. That there's really nothing that I can think of, that's sitting on my desk right now, that's not regulated on some level or another.

But I think that my relationship with those in the industry has always been good. I think I have a lot of people that I respect in the industry, and I think respect me back. So I think it's been good.

INTERVIEWER: And so what was your profit margin as a medical marijuana dispensary owner in ‘9, ‘10?

WANDA JAMES: So we sold our-- we do this a lot, because we're serial entrepreneurs-- we actually sold our dispensary in June of 2010. And with the proceeds from the dispensary, we opened up Simply Pure Medicated Edibles. And we started an edible company. So from July of 2010 until January 1st of 2011, we did test marketing, we did product R&D for the edible company. We hired four chefs, graduates of Johnson and Wales. We opened up the first commercial kitchen. So a lot of the rules for edibles were actually written by us, because so many times before that, edibles were made in a kitchen and were brought into folks.

So at that point it became scary to us. Because I started to think about food, and food handling, that the marijuana isn't the problem. It's the lack of understanding of food, to keep people safe. So we actually wanted Simply Pure to do it the right way, with chefs, with kitchens, with packaging machines, with sanitary conditions, and with exact dosing. So we had a 10,000 square foot grow facility. At the time, we were one of the few facilities-- manufacture of infused product facilities-- that actually grew all of our own cannabis.

INTERVIEWER: So this was within Denver?

WANDA JAMES: Yes, this was all within Denver. So we did everything ourselves, in-house. Everything. Packaging, growing, infusing, cooking, selling-- I had a sales force of 15 people throughout Colorado. Simply Pure was one of the biggest out there, if not the biggest.

INTERVIEWER: And so, did you taste test?

WANDA JAMES: We actually went through a number of different things at the time. We worked with Full Spectrum Laboratories to do all the tasting. We had hired a taste engineer from Hershey. I didn't know that there were taste engineers, but there are taste engineers.

INTERVIEWER: And a taste engineer, what does that mean?

WANDA JAMES: They can take and mask certain foods. So you look on the back of your Hershey bar, there's all these words and preservatives that I can't pronounce, right? Well, those things don't taste good. So a taste engineer actually works on ways of making sure that you don't
taste those. And it was amazing that she made it a gelatin mix out of nothing but oregano, and you know how strong oregano is, right? Super, super, super strong. And then she put a few things in it, and then handed it to us. And it was, like, vanilla, I think she put in there, with some other stuff in there, with the oregano. And you could not taste any of the oregano, all you could taste was the vanilla. It was amazing.

So she was showing us how to work with cannabis. And not always to disguise the taste of cannabis, but sometimes to make it work with other ingredients. Sometimes to disguise it, depending on what it was. Which was the real secret behind the fact that our edibles were almost too good. That people complained because they forgot that they were medicated. Which isn't a good thing to do, forget that they're medicated, because you get really high.

INTERVIEWER: And so did you have a suggested dosage on your-- forgive my ignorance. Brownies, chocolate bars, lollipops, all of the above?

WANDA JAMES: No. So we wanted to actually do food, and more sophisticated candies. We did not want to appeal to children. And funny enough, at the time-- So we did-- they looked like Reese's Peanut Butter Cups, but they were-- coconut almond was one on the inside. A peppermint cup, a peanut butter and jelly cup, and then we had peanut brittle. And sesame brittle, which was one of my favorites, which was like peanut brittle but made sesame seeds and not peanuts, which is fabulous.

We did marinara, green chili, mango salsa, peanut butter. And with our sauce line-- the peanut butter, the mango salsa, and the marinara sauce, green chili sauce-- was so that people could use those infused foods in recipes. So you could make pizza and spaghetti. With the peanut butter, you could obviously have a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, or you could make Thai chicken satay. You know what I mean? And so Scott had put together all of these recipes that you could use with our sauces, to be able to create real meals and real food. Because since Scott was now cooking for people at end of life, there is only so many brownies a sick person can eat. You've got to be able to give them something that's a little bit more nourishing.

INTERVIEWER: So did you have a distribution end? Did you distribute to hospices? Or how did that work?

WANDA JAMES: We worked with Namaste Hospice for a little bit, and they were the first hospice organization in America that allowed cannabis for the end of life patients. So Scott cooked for two patients that were end of life. We've made candies for sick children that have some strange diseases, with their spleen fluctuating. I mean, we cooked for people specifically with cancer. I mean, Scott would consult with a lot of folks, to actually devise diets and dietary things for these folks that actually had cannabis in them.

INTERVIEWER: This may be an unfair question, but did the media focus on the healing benefits? Or were they more sensationalist in their focus?

WANDA JAMES: I think with us, you know what? We've been really good about keeping folks focused on the food, on the social justice. I mean, I'll be honest. Scott and I really aren't that
interesting, because we don't do a lot of crazy things. I mean, we're not stoned in the street. We're not screaming at each other. We're not beating up our employees.

INTERVIEWER: Are there dispensary owners who are?

WANDA JAMES: I mean, you can watch all of the different shows that run from those times. And they were always trying to find the most colorful dispensary owners that they could, or the folks that work for them.

INTERVIEWER: I do recall seeing a show I taped called Pot Barons of Colorado, which was very intriguing. Anyway.

WANDA JAMES: So there are definitely more colorful people in this industry than Scott and I. I mean colorful not from a race perspective, but colorful from just a personality and a fun perspective. Scott and I, we tend to be serious and methodical about what we do. Simply Pure was amazing. The issue with Simply Pure at the time was, medical marijuana-- what people don't realize, I don't know if Brian and Christian talked about it-- but I don't want to say that it was failing, but financially it was ridiculously difficult. And I don't know anybody that was making money during that time.

INTERVIEWER: So you did your business at a loss?

WANDA JAMES: Oh, yeah. Because Simply Pure-- there was 200,000 patients, 175,000 patients or some number in there, back in 2011, 2012. Lots of dispensaries, a few edible companies. So dispensaries were losing money. So they wanted to use edibles as a way of bringing people in. I mean, come on in, and get a free edible. So they wanted to keep pushing the price of edibles lower and lower and lower and lower. Well, we had a very high end edible product. Even when we had the dispensary, the Apothecary of Colorado, we were selling edibles at that time for $25, $30, depending on what they were.

2011, 2010, dispensaries started losing money, wanted to get rid of them. So they wanted edibles in the $3 to $6 range. Which there was no way that any of the Simply Pure-- given the ingredients that we used were organic and real cocoa, and we had chefs in the sales force and the kitchen. It was just not a $3 product at all. So we were priced out of the industry. And it's one of those really good lessons in the beginning of any industry. You've got to be like water and ready to change on a moment's notice. And you can be big, as long as you have the funds to change. But at the time, we had put so much money into being big and being solid that there was just no way that we could compete with a $3 edible.

INTERVIEWER: Why was the medical marijuana dispensary business floundering? Was it a glut of dispensaries?

WANDA JAMES: Too many dispensaries, too little patients, and then dispensary owners not knowing how to compete. The only way they thought they could compete was lower, lower, lower, lower, lower, lower, lower, lower, prices. Until they got to the point where, at one point, they were selling $5 grams. And that's not sustainable to pay your employees, to pay your lights. I mean, if
you're selling out of the back seat of your car, sure. Whatever you make for the day is a bonus. But business doesn't work that way. And so a lot of folks really priced themselves out, and it also gave rise to the big, well-funded dispensaries. Because they were making so much money, they were like, yeah, we'll run it at a loss for four years, until all you guys are gone.

Which is exactly what we're seeing now. All those guys got bought out, because “I got $10 million in the bank, I can do this for years. Until you all run out of money, and then I'm able to come back in and take it over.”

INTERVIEWER: And by big dispensaries, you mean backed by corporate backers?

WANDA JAMES: Not owned by corporate, but some dispensaries are backed by more wealthier investors. I don't know that we actually have any corporate backing yet. I mean, there are some hedge funds out there that are currently backing. But even back there, in the day, there were just some more wealthy owners that were putting more money into some of the businesses.

INTERVIEWER: And riding it through.

WANDA JAMES: Exactly.

INTERVIEWER: So, two maybe diverse questions here. But one is, so you were very highly aware of the push for legalization of recreational marijuana at the time. I'll ask that question, and then I want to ask about the ethnic communities in Denver, African American community. But first, what was your knowledge of, or activity with, legalization of recreational marijuana at the same time you were doing your Simply Pure edible product and business?

WANDA JAMES: We were all involved in it. I mean, we'd been outspoken on a number of different things. We were a part of everything that was happening in the industry. Working with Brian at the time with Sensible Colorado. I mean, not working with him, but supporting him and Mason on what they were doing, supporting a lot of new organizations that were coming up. All of the talks and battles at the Capitol, and all of those things that were happening. So we were thrilled to be a part of all of that. And when Amendment 64 came up, I'll never forget. Brian called, he's like, we're putting it on the ballot.

And I was on the initial Amendment 64 steering committee that came together, I believe. Let me see if I can get this right. It was myself, Brian Vicente, Christian Sederberg, it was Mason, Steve Fox. There was Rick Ritter. Boyd Graham, who, at the time, was Peter Lewis's person-- Peter Lewis, the millionaire behind Progressive Car Insurance. And I can't remember who else was--oh, and Lisa Kaufman, who was Jared's outreach and now campaign manager. I can't remember who else, I think that was it, that actually started on the Amendment 64 committee.

They did an amazing job to get everything on track, and polling was saying that this was time. And, of course, the politicians in Colorado were saying, don't do it, don't do it, don't do it. And we're, like, we're doing it, we're doing it, we're doing it. And we did it, and it was a landslide. I will say that I had taken myself off of the committee at some point, just because running a business became extremely daunting, especially during that time.
INTERVIEWER: And this is 2011?

WANDA JAMES: 2011.

INTERVIEWER: OK. So backtracking, and then I'll go back to the community, and then talk about the African American communities of color. You hint at, or I believe I learned about it. Simply Pure, as high end edible company, didn't continue beyond a certain date.

WANDA JAMES: End of 2012, I think, is when we closed.

INTERVIEWER: And you closed because it was just not sustainable?

WANDA JAMES: Just not sustainable. And I was, at the time, still running James Foxx Communications. So we had a new restaurant over here, and it was just really difficult. So we didn't want to destroy the brand by offering something cheaper. We knew that the brand was big by this time, so we just ceased operations and closed the doors, because I knew-- or we knew as a team, and as a company-- that legalization would be the opportunity to bring Simply Pure back.

INTERVIEWER: So you decided to just hold on to the name as sort of a trademark name. And then, at that point, when you closed Simply Pure, the high end edible company, were you involved in the marijuana business at all? Or did you suspend business activity?

WANDA JAMES: So at that point, what happened was-- So a lot of people started asking me to then consult, marijuana-wise, and I was still doing it underneath the James Foxx banner.

INTERVIEWER: And marijuana-wise?

WANDA JAMES: Oh, yes. I'm doing marijuana type consulting on that side. I mean, James Foxx still exists as a company, but basically I morphed James Foxx into the Cannabis Global Initiative. Because that became the work that I wanted to do with cannabis. And about that time was when Jamaica started talking about legalization, and we knew things were getting ready to change throughout the Caribbean. And then there were some folks here that wanted some consulting services. So it went right from there, right into working in the industry.

INTERVIEWER: And does Jamaica have legalized cannabis?

WANDA JAMES: They're working it, right now. So they're in the midst of it. This year, on Bob Marley's birthday, they allowed medicinal cannabis. And now they're trying to figure out what recreational will look like, and how they're going to give out licenses. But they're almost there. Probably in the next month or so, they'll be there. And Puerto Rico is also coming on board, which is fabulous. And Canada and Mexico, Germany. Everybody.

INTERVIEWER: So tell me a little bit about your interaction with the communities of color. And especially the African American community in Denver, or the Denver metro area, during, say, when you were running Simply Pure as an edible company, to today.
WANDA JAMES: Horribly negative.

INTERVIEWER: Horribly negative?

WANDA JAMES: Black people were horribly negative.

INTERVIEWER: And you're referring to the African American community in Denver. Do you want to expand on that?

WANDA JAMES: What does that mean, and who was the most horrible?

INTERVIEWER: This is not an investigative journalism project, but it is oral history. So, I guess, how and why?

WANDA JAMES: How and why? That's easy. Sometimes, the black community operates from a position of fear, instead of a position of offense and doing more to help ourselves. Understandably why. I mean we've been arrested for this plant for many years, we've been beaten down for it. All the reasons that we're involved in it now are all the reasons why the black community has been terrified.

The black community has also been marketed to in such a negative way about this plant, to where we've been brainwashed to believe that the plant is the problem, and not law enforcement. You always hear, my boy was smoking weed, now he's in jail, and somehow it's the weed's fault. You know what I mean? No, it's law enforcement's fault. It's the law's fault. It's the way that we have lived in this prison system that we live in's fault, not cannabis.

So Bill Johnson, who was a columnist at the Denver Post, was a good friend of ours. And we wanted to tell him that we had bought a dispensary. And he was sitting at the restaurant one night, 8 Rivers, downtown. And I said Bill, I've got a story for you. He's like, what is it? And I'm, like, you've got to eat first. And I'll tell you afterwards, because you're not going to believe what's getting ready to happen in the next couple days. He's like, what? What, what's happening? What's happening? He's like, you're selling the restaurant. You guys are getting divorced. I'm like, no, no, no. It's nothing like that. He's like, what's going on? I'm like, it's going to be a good story.

So when I sat down with him after dinner, and I told him, I mean, he just sat there looking at me with this blank face, like have you lost your mind? Why would you do this? He was supportive, but he was, like, I can't believe you're going to do this. And so, he wrote a column the next day-- or the next couple of days-- called Coming Out of the Cannabis Closet. Of which, when that came out in the Denver Post, we got so many phone calls from black elected officials, from black business people. Telling us how our career was over, nobody will ever deal with you guys again, I can't believe you're crazy enough to put this out there, what the heck are you doing. And why would you do this?

And it was also kind of amazing to me. It was the first time that I realized that people didn't know I smoked pot. And I thought it was funny, because I'm, like, I own a Jamaican restaurant. I
don't know, I guess I've always figured that people would know. I went to the University of Colorado.

INTERVIEWER: I can only imagine how my mother would react if I-- So, to interject, as a girl who grew up as an upper middle class African American, it's not surprising.

WANDA JAMES: The shock was real. I mean, people were absolutely confused why this would be something we would choose to do. Which let me know how bad the marketing was.

INTERVIEWER: By marketing, what do you mean?

WANDA JAMES: How bad-- or how good the marketing was, I should say. How good the 80 years of negative marketing has been, surrounding this plant, to make us believe that the issues in our community are directly related to marijuana.

INTERVIEWER: Was there a sense of-- and I may be construing too much-- was there a sense of disappointment amongst some prominent African Americans? Because you were a prominent symbol of African American success? And here you were, starting a weed dispensary. I may be putting words--

WANDA JAMES: No, that was exactly the feel. And people would look at us, and be, like, why would you do this? What would you possibly hope to get out of this?

INTERVIEWER: We're pausing for a second. Wanda's talking to her staff. And we’re back.

WANDA JAMES: Yeah, it was definitely disappointment. My haters were happy, because they just knew I was going down. So it was, like, you just messed up everything.

INTERVIEWER: And not to get into it, your business rivals, are you referring to as--

WANDA JAMES: My haters. My little Taylor Swift analogy. So for me, I found it really strange. Because, once again, it's the same thing that I say to everybody. Who do you think I get high with? And then I get this dumbfounded look on my face. And usually it's the person sitting across from you that happens to be an elected official, or happens to be an attorney, or happens to be a corporate executive, and happens to be black while they're holding a joint. And then it just dawns on them that we're not the only two upper middle class blacks that are smoking weed. Guess what? Guess what? Guess who these people are, that are smoking all the time.

And this is also, too, why I knew that cannabis was going to be legal a lot faster than what other people were betting on. Just because of who I get elevated with. I mean, there is no non-level of person that does not consume cannabis. I'm not going to say I haven't gotten high with 21-year-old snowboarders, I have. But that's not my normal group of folks that you're hanging out with. They're over at my house for dinner, or I'm over at their house for dinner. Or that we go out with on a Friday or a Saturday night. It's that same group of folks. My friends in Los Angeles, and my friends in New York City, the guys on Wall Street. So when you have knowledge of that, and
these are the people that run politics and run campaigns, there's no doubt that this was going to be legal faster than anybody else thought it was going to be.

So all of this happens. Rec passes with more votes than Barack Obama, and more votes than the governor, and more votes than just about everybody in Colorado. Even though the politicians campaigned against it, the governor campaigned against it, the mayor campaigned against it. And even after it was passed, it kept blowing up and blowing up, and more and more sales. And people kept saying, oh, it's going to level off. Oh, it's going to level off. Well, a year later, we haven't leveled off. The sky hasn't fallen. All the things that the governor said was going to happen haven't. The mayor said people are going to stop coming to Denver, and we're going to lose our quality of life. Well, Denver is the number one place in the country to live.

I've had arguments with the executives at Visit Denver, that actually had the nerve to say that it was their marketing campaign as to why we had double digit record numbers in tourism. And I told them face to face, I'm, like, you can't be that arrogant. To really think that it is a marketing campaign as to why you have double digit tourism, and the video was just not that good. I mean, it is an absurd place for people to be sometimes. And then, of course, the Colorado numbers came out probably six, seven months ago, that prove what we've been saying for the last two years. Is people are coming to Colorado because of legal cannabis, because legal cannabis says that this is an interesting place to be. Whether you smoke or don't smoke. The mountains, the freedom, the idea that this is happening.

Even people that want to walk into a dispensary and not buy anything, but just walk in and get giggly because they're here. They're seeing something, and want to talk to my budtenders about being in their dorm in 1971. And we want to share those stories with them.

INTERVIEWER: Budtenders, by the way?

WANDA JAMES: Budtenders, like bartenders but budtenders.

INTERVIEWER: Gotcha.

WANDA JAMES: We want to call them weedologists, so we're working on different names right now. But I mean even today, a former member of the mayor's staff is coming in, because some of his folks from out of town are here, and they want to come in and see a dispensary. So all those people in 2009 and 2010 and 2011 that called us crazy are now coming back around and wanting to talk, and saying, you guys were right. And how do we get involved, and what do we need to do? Complete turn of events.

INTERVIEWER: So I believe we probably have about 25 minutes? Do we? I'm not looking at an iPhone or a watch.

WANDA JAMES: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Yes? OK.
WANDA JAMES: About thirty minutes.

INTERVIEWER: OK, there's several questions I'd like to ask you. I'll save this for later, but-- no, I'll ask this now. Is there anything you know now, that you wish you knew when you started? And with you, you've been an entrepreneur for most of your life, so I'll just limit that to starting in the marijuana industry.

WANDA JAMES: Of course. Yes. I would have made my business like water in 2010. And what we're doing with Simply Pure now is we are anticipating all of the possibilities of change. So we're not building anything that is ridiculously expensive and there to move things forward, because the industry is going to change. Clearly it's going to change. So you've got to be well-funded enough to take advantage of that change, and you've got to be flexible enough to be able to move with that change.

INTERVIEWER: And how do you see it changing?

WANDA JAMES: Oh, my goodness. I mean, we get new rules every day on the negative side of how we can and cannot sell different things. Edibles are getting ready to take a major hit in October, because they're going to play with the dosages, what the maximum dosage could be. And people say, well, this is the way that we're protecting folks. Well, it's not protecting people. It's, like, what kind of product can we make in a 10 milligram package that still makes the business owner money? And unfortunately for the city taking in all of this money, and the state taking in all of this money-- which they're very happy to get-- they seem to be very quite content to make sure that the business owner themselves doesn't make any money. So it's really an absurd situation that we'll be speaking out against a lot.

INTERVIEWER: And so, speaking of business, I have a combined question. I get the sense-- and I have been told-- that the green rush has been very good for women entrepreneurs. So I'd like you to tell me a bit about women in the industry. But also, on the flip side, I get the sense-- and have been told-- that there is an irony, in that legalization, the green rush, has primarily benefited people not of color. Even though the laws of Colorado may have benefited from a social justice angle, it seems like the green rush has closed out certain people of color. Could you talk about those two things?

WANDA JAMES: Yes. Women in the industry. So women right now make up about-- what we think, because, miraculously, the state can't seem to give anybody any real numbers. Which, I wanna talk about that and the issue with race, and why the state won't give out those numbers or whatever they're looking at. But we're estimating about 36% of the industry now has a woman at the head of it, as their head executive or as a manager. About 36%. We think about 23% of the industry is owned by women, or has a female partner. And those numbers come from-- I think it was Vice Magazine or somebody. I can't remember who it was, to be honest with you. I don't want to say I don't remember who it was, but somebody actually just took weed maps, and went through and called all the people. Because we can't get these numbers to quantify through the state.
Which helps me answer the next question as to, why won't the state release those numbers? Well, the state has said that they don't have that information. But they clearly have it, because I was looking at my application, and my application asked me if I'm male or female, and what race I am. So I'm assuming that was all they would need to find out what race I was, and if I was male or female, but I don't know. They can't seem to pull that onto a computer.

INTERVIEWER: And this is your dispensary application?

WANDA JAMES: Yes. Well, it's actually the financial declaration to be able to own a dispensary. They want to know if I was male or female, and what race I am. So they have this information, but they won't release it. And they won't release it because what just happened a couple weeks ago. Because the Freedom of Information Act was pushed, and they had to release who all the owners were of the businesses. Now, it doesn't necessarily say if those owners-- what race they are. But they have figured out who those people are, and I think it was 28% of this industry is owned by five white men. Did you see that article?

INTERVIEWER: No, I didn't.

WANDA JAMES: It came out last week. I'll forward it to you. I think that's the number. It was either 33% or 28%. I'm sorry, I have all these percentages going on, I can't remember what it was. And what it's leading to are monopolies right now. Because what we talked about earlier-- the bigger dispensaries, which are now funded by some corporations, and some big money-- they can just wait it out, while the little dispensaries go out of business, as they keep dropping prices, dropping prices, dropping prices.

So people of color have been effectively shut out of the process. One, because you can't be a dispensary owner if you've had a felony drug conviction. And guess who has a whole lot of felony drug convictions? Because of 80 years of prohibition, and 80 years of being targeted, and what we've talked about with my brother and different things. My brother had to stop being my grower. He could not work in my dispensary. I think now he can, because it's been 10 years since the end of his felony. I think he can come back in at this point. But it's pretty amazing, when you look at an industry that has discriminated so heavily against people of color, and now it makes it almost impossible to extremely difficult to be a part of the industry.

INTERVIEWER: Would another reason be the capital needed?

WANDA JAMES: Sure. And people bring that up all the time. And don't get me wrong, that's a real issue. This is an expensive business to get into, but all businesses are expensive to get into. So I don't necessarily-- people of color have an issue of raising capital for any business, because most of us can't go to mom and dad and be, like, hey, can you guys loan me a million? Or $100,000, or how about $10,000. Most of us don't have that ability to do that. And most of us don't have friends in that scenario. I imagine when my rich white friends get together, they probably have other rich white friends that would probably give them $100,000 to help them start their business. And a lot of people of color don't have those kind of circles.
So what makes it harder in this industry is even if you have a good idea, and you're a proven entrepreneur, and you have a proven background, you can't go to a bank. Which would be your first lending opportunity. Or to the SBA, and get your-- that's how we actually started our first restaurant years ago, was SBA did part of the loan for us. So in this industry, I don't have that option. So it makes it even more difficult to find the money.

INTERVIEWER: So going forward, how does one work on expanding opportunities for African Americans or people of color? I believe it was Christian Sederberg who mentioned if it were to do all over again, maybe the felony limitation would be-- they would think twice about that.

WANDA JAMES: Not they would think twice about it, they wouldn't have done it. It would've been out.

INTERVIEWER: So what do you see? How do you see expanding opportunities for people of color in this industry, or has it gone-- not to be negative or pessimistic-- beyond a point of which there would be an opening?

WANDA JAMES: We're at the tip of the iceberg right now. Even though Colorado feels like, you know, we've definitely locked it up here in Colorado, you've got to remember there's 50 other states. It's just starting. Colorado is the vision of what is possible throughout the United States, and throughout the Caribbean, and throughout the world. The bigger piece that I think that, if you were going to look at what you would change, would be doing what maybe Oakland has done. And other places are learning from us. So Oakland, as a city, has said, yes. You can get a license, but 51% of those licenses are going to come from disadvantaged areas.

This is something that I think that Colorado could have done. California is extremely difficult to do anything gray space, because of Prop 209. I don't know if you're aware of Prop 209, but it's that you can't have any race based programs. So no Affirmative Action in colleges, no nothing. Which is crazy, because that was brought up by a black man, but another whole conversation. But the way Oakland would get around that is saying that it has to come from-- a disadvantaged community resident in Oakland has to have 51% of those licenses. I think 51 is extremely aggressive, which I love. I'm glad to see that happen. But even here in Colorado, they could have said that a percentage of these licenses would have to have entailed some type of minority disadvantage business, or female ownership, to be able to take advantage of the people who have been most decimated by the legal system.

INTERVIEWER: I guess I have a quick question. Why do you think there it seems to be a lot of opportunity for women in the green rush? Is it because it's a nontraditional business?

WANDA JAMES: I think that a lot of women that get involved are a lot of your hard hitting female executives. This is the new big thing. I think it comes back to, once again, coming out of the cannabis closet. I think that women now finally feel like-- to where guys have always-- Think about a pot smoker in the 1980s. You're always going to think of a skateboarding man, right? You're not going to think of a girl. You're definitely not going to think of a grown woman. You know what I mean? You're not going to think of that person. I think that we are the fastest
growing group of cannabis smokers. Not because it's new to us, but because we're the most likely to come out of the closet, where guys have just always existed in the space.

And I think that business women executives are detail oriented. I think it's a natural fit. And I also think that the women who have been involved in the industry are bringing a lot of those younger women-- not even younger, but older women, or whoever it may be-- into the industry with them. So it's an interesting group of folks, or women, that are occupying the space right now.

INTERVIEWER: Yes, and I guess I digressed a bit. And you were saying back to African Americans in the industry that this is the tip of the iceberg. So I take it you were going to say there would be opportunities in other states.

WANDA JAMES: Huge opportunities in other states. I think that once we let our collective guard down, and we stop demonizing it in churches-- and when I speak to pastors, and when I speak to elected officials, I'm able to stop them from feeling so negative about this. And understanding that the issues that our community has from cannabis is from law enforcement policing and the privatized prison system, and not from the actual use of cannabis. And it's also funny to me that we have no issue with someone having some Hennessy when they go home at night, but don't bring a joint into the house. I mean, it's really kind of absurd when you think about the issues that alcohol has caused our community, and we're perfectly fine with it. Yet we make up stuff about cannabis, which is kind of crazy.

INTERVIEWER: I think we have probably about 10 minutes left, or so. Just a couple other questions. Are you still active in the Cannabis Global Initiative?

WANDA JAMES: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Tell me a little bit about that.

WANDA JAMES: Well, I should say yes and no. When I took over Simply Pure, we let it wane a little bit, just because it's hard to be starting a business and running another business. So just recently we've identified a new CEO, which we'll be announcing soon. We're looking at some new contracts for CGI, and some exciting things that are going to be happening.

INTERVIEWER: And the focus of Cannabis Global Initiative is to raise awareness?

WANDA JAMES: It's to help municipalities, elected officials and even businesses talk about-- from communication purposes, from a marketing standpoint, from political standpoint-- going from an illegal market to a legal and regulated market. So we can help you with the regulatory framework. We can help you with communications. Because all that's a part of it. Because even though you're going to change the laws and change the rules, you still have to be able to talk to the cities, the people who are there, in ways that's going to work from a positive standpoint for you. And as we know, government officials don't always do that very well on their own.
INTERVIEWER: I have two other questions. One regional and one global. So you alluded to this already a little bit before-- and I ask this of all the narrators-- what's the significance of Colorado being the first state in the country and world to legalize the recreational use of marijuana? And is there anything unique to this region or state that you think allowed Colorado to be the first?

WANDA JAMES: Yes. Well, let's do that backwards. What was unique, and why Colorado passed, and why it was the first one and not California-- which, I think, a lot of people would have naturally thought would have been the first place-- I think comes down to a homogeneous society, for the most part, and a small society. It's a small enough state to get your arms around, and to be able to make this change happen. It was easy to communicate what was happening, and the change that was happening, and the feels that was happening, to be able to get people to speak about it positively.

The years of us being a libertarian type state. You don't tell us what to do, we do what we want to do. We're the people is the kind of feel for Colorado, which, definitively I think, helped in the overall vote to make it happen. But the support in moving up to that is because it was small enough to really communicate to five million people. That's less of a challenge than to communicate to 42 million people in California.

And when I say a homogeneous society, I mean it's 3% black population. I know it's larger with Latinos, but for the most part, Colorado doesn't have all of the same issues that a Los Angeles has, or that a California has. In other words, we don't have extreme poverty. We don't have extreme crack use. We don't have extreme ghettos. You know what I mean? It's a society of people in the middle. You know what I mean? And we don't have extreme-- well, I mean, we do, we have a few, but I mean, it's not like the numbers like you see in-- We don't have 16-year-olds driving Benzes-- I mean, driving Rolls-Royces-- in Denver. By the handfuls.

So it was easier to address all of the different issues that each community was going to have. It was just an easier place to get our arms around. And Colorado has been a libertarian state for as long as I can remember. And we've been a pot smoking-- we've been number two on the pot smoking states since, like, 1960-something.

INTERVIEWER: Is there a pot smoking index here?

WANDA JAMES: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: There is?

WANDA JAMES: Oh, yeah. Boston is number one, Boulder is number two. As a state, I believe, overall, I think Cali was number one, and Colorado was number two. Or, I'm sorry, maybe it was Massachusetts. Massachusetts, California, and Colorado. But Massachusetts made sense, because of the amount of colleges, universities.

INTERVIEWER: And so what do you see for the future? What do you think is most important for marijuana legislation in the next 10 years? And do you see whoever gets elected president in
this interesting presidential season-- which a whole other topic-- do you see that things could radically change, depending on who's elected?

WANDA JAMES: No. Had this been a year earlier, or two years earlier, before Colorado was able to post these amazing numbers, then I would have said, yes. The new president could definitely dramatically change things. There is not a president in their right mind, there is not an elected official in their right mind, that's going to stand here in Colorado and say, I'm going to end 25,000 jobs, 1 billion dollars in sales, $135 million in tax revenue, $40 million to schools. We're just going to end that right now. There is not an elected official in the world that's going to do that. Not going to happen. Not going to happen, not going to happen, and not going to happen.

INTERVIEWER: Regardless of--

WANDA JAMES: Doesn't matter. Not going to happen. It will be one of those things where somebody may talk about it for a minute, but it's not going to happen. I think that the big difference of who becomes president next may affect-- I was going to say may affect how fast the Feds get out of this. But I'm not even sure that that's going to be the case, because I'm pretty sure that whoever is president right now wants this to end on the federal level. They do not want this to continue to be a discussion on the federal level, because it's kind of an absurdity. The federal government is getting taxes, they don't want to arrest people anymore, it is hugely unpopular to put people in prison right now.

There's just no upside to this any longer. Law enforcement is getting beat up for their use of cannabis for harassment of people of color. Black Lives Matter, Trayvon Martin, Michael Gardner have brought all of this to the forefront. The fact that every one of those names-- Sandra Bland-- everybody that I just spoke about-- What was the first thing that the cops released on them? Before we even knew what the hell happened, the first thing that came out was they had marijuana on them. They had a marijuana bag. They had marijuana in their system. I mean, as if there is something that makes you a crazy person after you smoke marijuana, which is absurd.

So all of these things together in the time that we're at right now, there is just not even a political stance that anybody could take right now. Not going to happen.

INTERVIEWER: So what do you think is most important for marijuana legislation in the next five or 10 years?

WANDA JAMES: It's not going to be a big deal in five or ten years, but in the next two or three years? A, ending it on the federal level. Not just taking it off of the schedule, but completely decriminalizing it on the federal level. Allowing the states to do what it is that the states want to do. I'm a firm believer that if you want to have a dry county, and you don't want any of these wonderful pot numbers coming to your schools and your communities, then by all means, don't have it. And the county next to yours can make all the money that your county would make. So I think that it's important that we end it on the federal level immediately.
And then I think it's important that we look at this as a business, and a business like any other business. There is no crime around dispensaries, any more than there is in any other business in the world. There was a funny little note on Facebook that made me laugh, and they had a picture of Walgreens or a CVS up there, with a little prescription drug sign on it, because it's a drug store. And it said, nobody asked me if I was OK, if I could sign the petition to allow them to sell OxyContin in my neighborhood.

So this is what I'm saying. It's becoming a norm. And people that are anti-marijuana sound crazy at this point, even if you don't use it. I don't drink beer. I really just-- I don't understand it. It just really doesn't taste good, it makes you bloated, it makes you pee all day. I don't know why people love beer. But I have absolutely no qualms, do I hold any ill feelings about anybody that wants to make it, buy it, sell it, drink it. I mean, by all means, if that's your thing, I want you to go enjoy your cold beer on a sunny afternoon, or wherever you want to enjoy it. And I think that that's where people are ultimately coming now with cannabis. Because nobody's believing the ridiculousness anymore.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you, Wanda. That this has been a very informative, interesting, fascinating interview. And your mention of OxyContin, that's a whole other [INAUDIBLE] about the epidemic of opioids.

WANDA JAMES: Prince.

INTERVIEWER: Yes.

WANDA JAMES: Prince.

INTERVIEWER: Sadly. Prince, may he rest in peace.

WANDA JAMES: So sad.

INTERVIEWER: Somebody listening 25 years from now--

WANDA JAMES: Will be, like, who?

INTERVIEWER: The famous singer.

WANDA JAMES: Yes. The Artist Formerly Known as Prince.

INTERVIEWER: Is there any last thing you want to add before we make a wrap of this interview?

WANDA JAMES: If somebody is actually listening to this 85 years from now, when I'm dead and gone-- or in a state of suspended animation, or whatever is going on 85 years from now--there is nothing more than that I would want anybody to know that how proud, extremely proud, beyond proud I am of what has happened in this space, and have been a part of this. I've done a
lot of really amazing things in my life that I'm really also proud of, but there is just nothing--
man, there's just nothing that gives me any more satisfaction than this.

It's just phenomenal to me. It's changing people's lives. Man, it's the most amazing thing, just
ever. And as a connoisseur, as someone that has seen it work medicinally, as someone that has
seen Thanksgivings be much more positive with cannabis than alcohol. Just nothing but pride
over this. I have no iota of, well, should you have? Should you not? Yes, we absolutely should
have. Yes, it was the absolutely perfect thing to do at the time. And Brian Vicente and Christian
Sederberg, they're badass. I'm glad that they did this.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you. So this is a wrap of my interview with Wanda James. The date
again is May 18, 2016. This is Janet Bishop. And I think you're my last interview for me. But the
oral history project will continue, but as I'm heading to Minnesota, this is my last interview for
the Stories of Amendment 64 Oral History Project for Colorado State University. Thanks again,
Wanda. This was most interesting.

WANDA JAMES: You're welcome.

INTERVIEWER: Take care.