



HIGHER POWER

A FILM BY DEWEY A. ORTIZ, JR

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Logline

Higher Power uses the stories of Black Washingtonians fighting to enter the legal cannabis industry to reveal the stark reality of 700,000 disenfranchised Americans living in Washington, D.C. and the urgent need for D.C. Statehood.

Short Synopsis

Recreational cannabis use is legal in Washington, D.C. Recreational cannabis sales are not. *Higher Power* uses the stories of Black Washingtonians navigating this gray space while fighting to enter the legal cannabis industry to reveal the stark reality of 700,000 disenfranchised American citizens and the urgent need for D.C. Statehood. It explores how the D.C. Home Rule Act of 1973 marginalized D.C.'s Black community. It profiles Black cannabis and wellness entrepreneurs serving the community through the gray market and Black-owned licensed medical dispensaries juggling the impacts of a global pandemic and competition from unregulated operators. *Higher Power* shows how the federal government's control of the District has made a challenging process almost insurmountable, bolstering the case for D.C.'s right to self-rule.

Full Synopsis

Higher Power is a feature-length documentary exploring Washington, D.C.'s fight for cannabis legalization as part of a larger push for self-governance and statehood. Part advocacy doc, part travelogue and celebration of Black Washingtonian culture, *Higher Power* highlights local residents looking to create prosperity and nab a piece of the American Dream while trapped in a political system that denies its citizens the fundamental right to self-rule.

Viewed through the personal stories of advocates, lawmakers, and aspiring entrepreneurs, *Higher Power* details the impact of D.C.'s derailed cannabis legalization on Black communities it was enacted to revitalize. More than 70% of D.C. voters approved cannabis legalization. Still, Congress overturned the law, creating a gray market that continues to criminalize Black residents and deny them access to the economic opportunity of legal cannabis. This film documents, in real-time, the fight to end prohibition and the disenfranchisement of 700,000 U.S. citizens. *Higher Power* makes clear that the solution for both is D.C. statehood.

Incisive interviews from advocates such as Queen Adesuyi of the Drug Policy Alliance, Civil Rights attorney Nkechi Taifa and Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton connect the dots from the past to the present, weaving the current battle to establish a legal cannabis industry into the centuries-long fight for D.C. statehood, which legalization efforts reignited.

With iconic images of D.C. neighborhoods, landmarks, and culture, *Higher Power* offers a loving portrait of Black residents and their pursuits of the American dream. The film follows cannabis entrepreneurs Jason and Tahmika Aldrich, JohnChe Larracuenta, and Jamila Hogan and their arduous journeys to ownership in D.C.'s legal cannabis market while touting the health and wellness benefits of cannabis. *Higher Power* also profiles four Black-owned medical cannabis dispensaries with insight from their trailblazing founders about their business strengths and values and the operational challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and gray market competition.

The film concludes with a call to action for concerned Americans to contact their members of Congress and demand statehood for their fellow citizens in Washington, D.C. - adroitly using cannabis for a higher purpose.

Director's Statement

Higher Power highlights how 700,000 Americans are faring in a city where the ultimate power rests with those who don't live here, don't look like us, and don't share our values. The film makes you feel, in real-time, what it's like to be a spectator of this country's democracy. D.C. residents are crying out for equality. Our nation's capital has all the obligations of a state, but none of the benefits.

For nearly a decade, Congress has consistently compromised the health, and social and economic well-being of District residents by attaching riders that have banned D.C. from spending money to enact a voter-approved recreational cannabis program. By ignoring the will of the people and tying the hands of local D.C. officials, the federal government has delayed D.C. from implementing a medical cannabis program, running a needle exchange program, subsidizing abortions for low-income women, providing healthcare benefits for both gay and straight domestic partners, regulating when wet wipes can be marketed as flushable, and much more.

Higher Power allows Black Washingtonians to narrate their own stories while advocating for their unique needs and interests. Despite the disproportionate effects that the war on drugs had on the Black community, they've found ways to cater to the needs of the people. We live in a time of unaccountability, where many would rather shatter the mirror held up in front of us than take a look at who and what we are. The Black cannabis entrepreneurs and advocates who tell their stories show another example of how real change in America comes when its people force the hands of its politicians.

Higher Power documents the fight to end the criminalization of Black communities, for reparations from the war on drugs, and full citizenship rights for D.C. residents. I want the audience to leave the theater outraged and motivated.

Q & A (Producer and Director)

Why did you make this movie?

"We began making this film to highlight Black entrepreneurs in the cannabis industry. It's constantly cited that Black owners make up about 2% of the industry. We didn't want to reinforce that narrative. Instead, we wanted to show Black folks succeeding in the industry. Too often, when we don't see ourselves in spaces, and we constantly hear that we aren't there, we opt out. We're told that the hurdles are too high. And while the hurdles are certainly high for Black entrepreneurs in the cannabis industry, they are not insurmountable. What began as a story about entrepreneurship grew into a larger narrative about the importance of political power and representation.

We connected cannabis legalization to the fight for D.C. statehood. Washington, D.C.'s citizens are the only Americans in the continental US subject to taxation without representation. Washington, D.C.'s laws are subject to the political whims of Congress, which continues to deny the city the right to self-rule. It's an egregious example of political suppression and marginalization of the nearly 700,000 residents - mostly people of color. The country needs to know about the fight for D.C. statehood, and it needs to act." - Rafi

"It was important to show everyday Black people in the cannabis industry. Every cannabis documentary I've seen about us revolves around celebrities. They never focus on the local issues preventing Black Americans from gaining equity in the growing industry. An industry that continues to generate wealth by capitalizing on our culture and our people. I wanted to show Black Americans trying to succeed and strive. I wanted to show both the legal and legacy sides of the cannabis community." - Dewey

Q & A (Continued)

What was your greatest challenge in making this film?

“Like most indie films, money and time were not always in large supply. I would love to be a full-time filmmaker, but I have a full-time job, like many others who worked on the film. Not being able to devote 100% of my time to *Higher Power* and timing our production and post-production to coincide with grant cycles were the biggest challenges.” - Rafi

“Funding is one of filmmaking’s greatest challenges. Filmmaking is expensive, and if you don’t have a rich uncle or rich parents, you have to find ways to make the film you want to make within the constraints of your budget. We were lucky that we were able to raise the funds we needed, but the process was grueling.” - Dewey

What do you hope audiences will take away from seeing *Higher Power*?

“I hope audiences take away two things: first, that the War on Drugs was a war on Black and Brown people, families, and communities. Second, the same people who initiated that war continue to wage war against D.C.’s majority Black and Brown population by denying us voting representation in Congress and blocking local legislation that would improve the economic, social, and physical health of Washingtonians.” - Rafi

“Washington, D.C. is a beautiful city with rich, vibrant residents actively fighting for self-determination. Despite the injustice of taxation without representation, Black people are still here, striving and fighting for their place in the cannabis industry. Facing tremendous odds, D.C. produces quality cannabis. Even as ideologues in Congress continue their failed war on cannabis, Black Washingtonians are succeeding in the nascent industry. We’re still here, and still fighting, and we need help from our fellow Americans to continue to fight.” - Dewey

What can the average person do to help?

“D.C. cannot achieve statehood without the 50 states. We need concerned Americans to contact their congressional representatives and demand statehood for the 700,000 residents of the District of Columbia. There is a major hole in our democracy because residents of the nation’s capital are second-class citizens who lack Congressional representation. Tell your Reps and Senators to vote yes on HR.51 and S.51, and more importantly, to stop overriding the will of D.C.’s residents and elected officials by blocking lawfully passed ballot initiatives and legislation, such as the 2014 approved ballot initiative to legalize cannabis for sales to adults.” - Rafi

“Call your senator, call your congressman and demand a repeal on the filibuster in the Senate. Demand a yes on a vote for D.C. statehood both in the House and the Senate. Tell them that you believe that the 700,000 citizens of D.C. deserve the right to self-determination. Washington Douglas Commonwealth deserves to be the 51st state of the United States of America.” - Dewey



Director Bio

Dewey A. Ortiz, Jr. (Director/Writer) is an award-winning filmmaker, writer, and producer. His work is dedicated to shifting perceptions of African-Americans in cinema, particularly D.C.'s Black community. Much of his work highlights the perseverance of Washington, D.C., residents. His series, *Survivor Stories*, chronicling four courageous D.C. women who have survived domestic abuse, won Best Web Series at the 2017 D.C. Black Film Festival. In 2019, Mr. Ortiz completed *The Runaways*, a powerful short filmed in D.C. and PG County, MD, that follows abused and neglected teenagers as they gather the courage to escape their tumultuous lives. *The Runaways* enjoyed a successful film festival run culminating in ten festival appearances and a Best Film Award. It is currently available for streaming on KweliTV.



Producer Bio

Rafi Aliya Crockett (Writer/Executive Producer), a native Washingtonian, is fiercely protective of her city. In addition to being a civically engaged resident who watches D.C. council hearings for fun, she is a proud champion of D.C. culture and patron of the arts. Ms. Crockett is co-president of the board of STABLE Arts, and has previously served on the board of HumanitiesDC and the Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts. Between 2019 and 2023, Ms. Crockett served on the city's Alcoholic Beverage and Cannabis Board, where she worked with legislators and government agencies to eliminate disparities in access, ownership, and participation in the city's alcoholic beverage and cannabis industries. The experience inspired her to develop *Higher Power* with the director Dewey Ortiz Jr. Ms. Crockett serves as the film's writer and executive producer. This is her first film.



Editor Bio

Brian Barber (Editor) is an award-winning editor, director, producer, and educator, with a passion for sharing honest, heartfelt, and compelling stories that create impact. He earned a master's degree in instructional technology and developed an interest in filmmaking during his studies. While spending 12 years as a high school English teacher and working as a film trailer editor, his work as a filmmaker has won him great acclaim. His project *Jar: Journey of a Horseman* received the First-Time Director Award from the Hollywood International Independent Documentary Awards. His *Project Arrowhead* received the Horses Helping Humans Award from the Equus Film Festival.

Participant Bios

Jason and Tahmika Aldrich are owners of Reset Wellness, a cannabis health and wellness brand. A legacy operator, Jason has a cannabis-related conviction. Reset Wellness boasts a large regional clientele, and the film follows the company's attempts to expand into the legal cannabis market.

Che Larracuenta is a medical cannabis patient and experienced cultivator convicted of felony possession with intent to distribute. Though he is a college graduate, Che's conviction made it impossible to find work. He turned to growing and selling cannabis illegally to support himself. Now that D.C. has lifted the prohibition on individuals with felony convictions in the industry, Che and his business partners plan to pursue a cultivation center license.



Jamila Hogan is a single mom and entrepreneur recognized for her cannabis events and product reviews. Jamila is the first Black woman to manage a cultivation center on the east coast, and continues to break barriers as she carves a unique path in the cannabis industry.



Linda Greene (Anacostia Organics), Corey Barnette (Kinfolk and District Growers), Norbert Pickett (Cannabliss), and Dr. Chanda Macias (National Holistic Healing Center) own licensed medical cannabis businesses in D.C. *Higher Power* documents their efforts to navigate shifting regulations and competition from the unregulated market, as well as their respective operational adjustments in the wake of the pandemic.



Crew

Director.... Dewey A. Ortiz, Jr.

Producer.... Rafi Aliya Crockett

Writers.... Rafi Aliya Crockett and Dewey A. Ortiz, Jr.

Associate Producers.... Paul Turner

Imani Pugh

Andrea O'Neal

Director of Photography.... Michael Wilson

Additional Camera.... Hans Charles

Dewey A. Ortiz, Jr.

Shaun Rosa

Paul Turner

Gaffers.... Leon Mitchell

Tamoaki Sasaki

Paul Turner

Michael Yoder

Music Composition and Supervision.... Aaron Abernathy

Sound Mix.... Studio Unknown

Visual Effects and Title Work.... Aurélie Beatley

Color Correction.... Eric Alverado

Original Title Design.... Gerald C. Watson

Voiceover.... Simone Andrews

Cast

Queen Adesuyi

Jason Aldrich

Tahmika Aldrich

L. Dara Baldwin

Corey Barnette

Yusrah "Gigi" Bilal

Dr. Malik Burnett

Corey "CK" Dunson

Linda Mercado Greene

David Grosso

Jamila "Jay Mills" Hogan

Kia Jackson

JohnChé Larracuenta

Dr. Chanda Macias

Kenyan McDuffie

Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton

Caroline Phillips

Norbert Pickett

Cecelia Pitt

Ty Hobson Powell

Bo Shuff

Nkechi Taifa

Brandon Todd