I began my career as a trial lawyer in Montana, practicing both criminal law and civil litigation. Around 2006, I started representing clients who had been charged with marijuana possession, despite holding valid registrations as medical marijuana patients under Montana law. It quickly became apparent that Montana's medical marijuana system was incomplete and unstable, exposing patients to continued legal jeopardy despite their attempts to comply.

During this same period, I faced my own health crisis. After months of severe illness and hospitalizations, I was diagnosed with Crohn's disease. I had been a regular cannabis consumer since college, unaware that I was inadvertently managing symptoms of a serious medical condition. When hospitalized, I disclosed my cannabis use to my medical team. Although they eventually recommended that I register under Montana's medical marijuana program, they ultimately refused to sign the necessary paperwork, fearing federal retaliation that could jeopardize their ability to prescribe narcotics. As a result, I had to drive through a snowstorm to Billings to find the only physician in the state willing to sign the required form.

Recognizing how broken the system was, I became active in reform efforts. I testified before the Montana legislature, warning that the voter-initiated medical marijuana law left patients and caregivers legally vulnerable and that even good-faith actors could be prosecuted under overlapping state and federal laws. Despite growing evidence of systemic failure, the Montana legislature consistently refused to update the law, unwilling to address cannabis policy due to political risk.

As national attitudes began to shift—with then-candidate Barack Obama signaling federal deference to state marijuana laws—a group of us decided to try to create a model medical marijuana business that could demonstrate professionalism and regulatory compliance. Together with Chris Williams, Tom Daubert, and Richard Flor, I co-founded Montana Cannabis. The company quickly grew to become one of the largest medical marijuana providers in the state.

After about a year, my ongoing health challenges made it difficult to continue working in a cultivation setting. I stepped away from Montana Cannabis and refocused my work on cannabis law, becoming one of Montana's first attorneys dedicated to advising patients and caregivers on compliance.

Roughly a year and a half later, on March 14, 2011, the DEA, FBI, and ATF executed coordinated raids on dozens of medical marijuana businesses across Montana, including all Montana Cannabis facilities. Federal agents entered greenhouses in hazmat suits, zip-tied workers by the roadside for local media to observe, and seized over 1,600 plants, records, and assets.

Federal charges soon followed against all four Montana Cannabis partners. In federal court, defendants were barred from referencing compliance with state law as a defense. Under federal sentencing rules, the prosecution threatened extreme mandatory minimum sentences—in my case, five to six felony counts carrying hundreds of years of exposure. When it became clear that mounting a constitutional or compliance-based defense was impossible, I accepted a plea agreement alongside Tom Daubert. We were treated as similarly situated under federal sentencing guidelines and were both sentenced to five years' probation rather than prison time by U.S. District Judge Dana Christensen.

Chris Williams refused the plea offer, went to trial, and was convicted on multiple counts, including mandatory firearm enhancements that exposed him to more than 80 years in prison. After a post-trial agreement with prosecutors, his sentence was reduced to five years.

Richard Flor also pleaded guilty and was sentenced to five years. Tragically, he died while in federal custody, after suffering from serious medical conditions that were poorly managed by the Bureau of Prisons.

The experience forced me to close my private law office. I shifted my focus entirely to cannabis reform work, eventually joining the Marijuana Policy Project (MPP), where I worked on changing cannabis laws across the United States and, ultimately, in Washington, D.C.