

When Ben Kimbro was a kid, he was scared to death of marijuana. "I grew up in the '70s and '80s. I believed Nancy Reagan, the Tulsa city councilor said of the former first lady's "Just Say No" to drugs campaign. That was then. These days, his day job is selling marijuana. And he loves it.

Kimbro, 46, left his position at Ross Group earlier this year to become director of public and strategic affairs for Harvest Health & Recreation Inc., one of the largest cannabis companies in the nation. "I think the easy thing to figure out about Ben Kimbro (is), if he's in any business, whether that is municipal government, or cannabis, it's because he's passionate about it," he said. "He eats up his work. Loves the challenge. Loves the complexity. Loves the pace of play." Kimbro's getting all that and more with Harvest, which he said employs more than 400 people in 11 states and is growing every day. He expects the company to have more than 1,000 employees in Florida alone by this time next year. Harvest recently went public and is valued at \$1.72 billion, Kimbro said. He's confident that it will soon become the largest cannabis company in the United States. "We run this business capably from seed to sale," he said. "From agriculture production to the customer retail experience." Kimbro got into the business when he was with Ross Group, a Tulsa-based engineering and construction services company that joined forces with Harvest to submit an application to the state of Arkansas to operate medical marijuana cultivation centers there. Kimbro helped lead the application process, and Harvest was awarded a license. Ross Group is doing the construction and design work on Harvest's cultivation and processing center in Newport, Arkansas. So the move to Harvest was a natural one for Kimbro. "I have been working hand-in-glove with these guys for a few years," he said. "I admire and respect every personality, every talented person that I have gotten to work with."

Kimbro's job title with Harvest is broad for a reason. He's into everything, from public relations to lobbying to government relations and more. "I do get to work,

as well, with our expansion team as a public affairs thing when we are working with a planning commission or a city council in Palm Springs, California, or Worcester, Massachusetts," Kimbro said. "I am the guy talking to these commissioners or councilors."

Speaking of city councilors, Kimbro is well aware that some people might question the wisdom of an elected official working in the marijuana industry. He gets it, but he doesn't sweat it. "As a guy who is a conservative, sure, a lot of thought went into this," he said. "I think that cannabis is the last great states' rights issue of my lifetime, and I am a guy who believes in states' rights. I At the end of the day, I view it as any other thing that should be regulated, and believe that if it is done right, it helps society more than it harms; it generates tax; and it creates jobs." What he doesn't believe is that marijuana is a gateway drug. "It's preposterous. People have a propensity for addiction; you have a propensity for addiction, and I have a propensity for addiction," the city councilor said. "Whether it is gambling, sex, alcohol, drugs, whatever it is, people who are going to be addicted to things are going to be addicted. And we need to pay tremendous attention to that with patient education and in ensuring that we have good substance abuse services and educate young people on the risks of these things. But no, the gateway drug conversation is preposterous." Prior to joining Harvest in September, Kimbro was part of a working group put together by the Mayor's Office to come up with medical marijuana policies for the city. He now recuses himself from all medical marijuana issues that come before the City Council. Don't interpret that to mean Harvest has plans to operate in Oklahoma. Kimbro said he doesn't expect that to happen any time soon because the market is so saturated and the state's regulations are so loosely written. "It is just not a market that appeals to us at this time," he said. "It's unfortunate. There are 3.9 million people here. It's my home state, and

I am pretty proud of that, but the state Department of Health has issued

â€” when I last checked â€” 113 dispensary licenses for Tulsa alone. The entire

state of Arkansas will only have 35.â€• Kevin Canfield 918-645-5452 kevin.canfield@tulsaworld.com Twitter: @aWo

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