



PHOTO SHAWN LEE STUDIOS

# SHALEEN

SHALEEN TITLE is a unique blend of social justice community organizer and activist attorney, working to end cannabis prohibition based on the injustice of the drug war. She has been campaign director for LEAP, co-author of "Ending the Drug War: A Dream Deferred" and spokesperson and coalition builder for Colorado's Amendment 64. She is working with the NORML Women's Alliance Sister-to-Sister program one-on-one, mentoring and encouraging women's involvement in a male-dominated movement. Her experience includes three years on the Board of Directors of Students for Sensible Drug Policy and a current position on the Board of Directors of Marijuana Majority, lobbying for medical marijuana Legislation in Illinois and Massachusetts. Shaleen is universally respected and applauded by her peers as competent, compassionate, a bridge to diverse communities and a joy to work with.

WORDS PEBBLES TRIPPET

*My overall professional goal is to bring more women and people of color into the large and powerful force to end the "war on drugs" -- and to replace this unwinnable war with a system of regulation that moves drug abuse problems into the realm of public health. Other countries that have started this process have lowered drug use and addiction rates and made their communities much safer.*

~ Shaleen Title

## HOW DID YOU GET INVOLVED IN MARIJUANA LEGALIZATION?

My interest in the issue evolved. When I was a student at the U of Illinois. I had friends who were arrested for using marijuana. Most were from the Chicago suburbs. Several were prosecuted, fined, kicked out of school. I thought, "Why should they be punished?" It seemed so unfair.

Over time, I came to realize that marijuana prohibition is far more unfair and devastating for others, and that my friends in fact were the fortunate ones. Many others face break-ins by swat teams that traumatize whole families, resulting in serious repercussions, imprisonment, children being taken away. So many can't afford legal help like my friends could; they have no recourse when that happens to them.

The drug issue started to become so clear, how it's related to mass incarceration as the new Jim Crow. Michelle Alexander's thesis in "The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness" is that slavery led to the practice of Jim Crow which led to Mass Incarceration. Rounding up millions of poor people and locking them up has replaced slavery and Jim Crow as the current legal tool to create what she calls a legal caste system. One in three black men will go to prison in their lifetime. It's morally reprehensible that by putting people in cages, both literally and figuratively by taking away voting rights, housing rights and employment opportunities, we are locking huge numbers of people out of society. The drug war issue is not about drug use but about finding a way to maintain control over poor communities of color.

What really made me see the sad reality firsthand was my internship as a Public Defender during law school. My heart broke at the situation. There were so many without money to hire a lawyer that we didn't even have sufficient time to





■ The Amendment 64 team

photo: Side Pocket Images

evaluate their cases and help them. Often the only advice we could give them was to take a plea deal if they didn't want to go to trial and end up facing a worse sentence or a mandatory minimum.

**YOU ARE KNOWN FOR PLAYING A CENTRAL ROLE IN COLORADO'S AMENDMENT 64 AND THE COALITION-BUILDING THAT WENT INTO PASSING IT. WHAT IS THE SOURCE OF YOUR CONSCIOUSNESS?**

My thinking was, you do everything you can to help. So I passed the bar, eventually quit my job in tax law and joined LEAP (Law Enforcement Against Prohibition). I thought I could make the most difference by building coalitions. This involved outreach to Black Law Enforcement Association, NAACP, and many other stakeholders.

Major Neill Franklin and I joined LEAP around the same time, and he has served as a major source of inspiration for me ever since. He has a way of relating to a person he is talking to. He always begins a professional collaboration by asking, "What can I do to help you?" and meaning it. I try to emulate that integrity and sincerity.

LEAP asked me to become Director of the Speaker's Bureau. That entailed recruiting and training law enforcement officers who decided they wanted to speak out against prohibition. They were whistleblowers bravely taking action against what they'd



■ Performance in a classical Indian dance show

photo: Vaibhava Dance School



■ Accepting the Hunter S. Thompson award from Colorado NORML

photo: Anita Thompson



■ Shaleen as a National Lawyers Guild legal observer for Occupy protests



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~ Shaleen Title

been participating in. I got to be the person to introduce them to the world of activism: how to tell their stories, how to take action.

Last year I became a consultant for Colorado's Amendment 64. I was the point person with three primary roles --

**1)** Helping build community-based coalitions, getting endorsements of their peers, serving as liaison to those communities, facilitating the coalition growing on its own.

**2)** Helping build a Speakers' Bureau, connecting with LEAP's work and other speakers' work, finding groups to host a speaker for five minutes, then sending speakers out to those groups.

**3)** Helping as a spokesperson at events and press conferences.

In building coalitions, the key is to create a diverse group as part of your process from the start and to give everyone an equal voice. I'd encourage anyone working in drug policy reform to make sure their board and leadership has plenty of women, people of color, non-marijuana users, people from the recovery movement and anyone else you can get who is not typical of the movement. If you want to reap the significant benefits, you need to put in the work to make your group and local efforts diverse.

■ Shaleen with Ethel Rowland and retired judge Maria Lucia Karam of LEAP



### **WORKING ON THE INITIATIVE MUST HAVE BEEN AN INSPIRING TIME.**

Ah yes, the morning of the election was electric. I'll never forget the atmosphere, the adrenaline. We were up all nite making signs. We went out the next day and held up our signs. We got such a reception, with the majority of people driving by honking, not just a few. We were in a place where, after so many years of losing, we were suddenly winning. What once was true was no longer true. Times are changing and we are experiencing a major cultural shift. When it comes to tactics, it is important to be open-minded. New approaches should be seriously considered.

### **WHAT ARE YOU DOING TO WELCOME WOMEN INTO THE MOVEMENT AND THE LEADERSHIP?**

I work with the NORML Women's Alliance Sister-to-Sister program one-on-one welcoming and mentoring women going thru the learning process. It's especially hard for young women in a male dominated movement. They feel more welcome with other women going thru the process with them. I advise them not to be afraid to speak up. They are valued. It gets better. As for a more seasoned campaign like Amendment 64, I believe womens' leadership played a profound role in the success of the initiative.

### **SPEAKING OF NEW APPROACHES, WHAT IS YOUR TAKE ON THE VALUE OF INCLUDING A PER SE DUI IMPAIRMENT POLICY IN THE LANGUAGE OF STATEWIDE INITIATIVES? I'M SPEAKING OF WHERE EVEN A SMALL AMOUNT OF CANNABIS IN YOUR SYSTEM BASED ON THC NANOGRAMS PER MILLILITER OF BLOOD ALLOWS A PRESUMPTION OF IMPAIRMENT WITHOUT PROVEN SCIENTIFIC STANDARDS, UNLIKE WITH ALCOHOL.**

I hate the per se standard -- it's problematic and unfair. You have to look at the science. A per se standard is not based on evidence of impairment. The cynical point of view is that some law enforcement departments may prefer this standard because they use it to make more arrests. But what we really need, in order to both protect the rights of marijuana users and keep our roads safe, is an accurate test for impairment.

### **A PER SE STANDARD IS A PROHIBITIONIST'S DREAM. SINCE THC REMAINS IN OUR FAT CELLS FOR WEEKS, EVEN MONTHS, WITHOUT EFFECT, HOW CAN CANNABIS USERS BE EXPECTED TO PRODUCE AN ACCURATE MEASUREMENT OF IMPAIRMENT MERELY FROM THE PRESENCE OF THC METABOLITES?**

I think the development of some type of roadside detection test for impairment is feasible. For example, I met a neuroscientist while I was in Colorado. There's a machine they use

*"There are still so few women involved in the legalization movement, and even fewer women of color. Shaleen is an absolute inspiration to female activists. She teaches us to never be afraid to speak our mind and reminds us that this isn't a movement only "by and about" white men. And personally without her advice I would have never been able to come out to my pretty traditional Chinese family about a cause I am passionate about."*

~Rachelle Yeung, Legislative Analyst,  
Marijuana Policy Project

*"I must be extremely careful with my comments for fear of making Shaleen appear as a fictional character of a father's dream. Shaleen is definitely at the top of my very short "got it going on list". With a healthy dose of intelligence, Shaleen can navigate difficult problems with ease. No shortage of wisdom and common sense here and when you marry these with great communication skills, an exceptional leader is born. Multi-tasking is nothing more than a mere hobby. apparently something she does just for giggles. While working for LEAP she had more balls in the air than the International School of Juggling. Unfortunately in my circles, exceptionally high performers are not regarded as pleasant company and this is where it becomes interesting with Shaleen. With her beauty, grace and warm heart, which emanates thru her captivating smile, she has shattered the paradigm. What a joy she is to everyone she comes in contact with. I once told Shaleen that I would be very proud to have her as a daughter. How proud her dad must be."*

~ Major Neill Franklin (ret.), Executive Director,  
Law Enforcement Against Prohibition



*"Shaleen embodies everything that's great about Students for Sensible Drug Policy. As a student she fought tirelessly to enact saner drug policies and is a mentor to today's generation of student activists. The Drug War would end a lot sooner if we had more Shaleen Titles fighting to end it."*

~ Kris Krane, Boardmember,  
Students for a Sensible Drug Policy

*"In my career, I was surrounded by my band of brothers each day. It wasn't until my work with LEAP that I have had the pleasure to meet and work with my band of sisters. Shaleen, although younger than I, has been my mentor in activism from the start. From her role teaching and guiding me to the evolution of our friendship, I consider her one of my shieldmaidens, always next to me as we work to right the many wrongs of drug prohibition."*

~ Lt. Diane Goldstein (ret.) Boardmember,  
LEAP

*"Like many great social justice leaders before her, Shaleen combines a great intellect with an absolute determination to shape a better world. Her contribution to making marijuana legal in Colorado was immense. She is a passionate advocate for drug policy reform and a force to be reckoned with."*

~ Brian Vicente, Co-author  
Colorado's Amendment 64



■ Shaleen's wedding day

for people with brain injuries to see if it's safe to drive. He told me that there could potentially be a baseline THC level for each patient that represents a level for safe driving, since every patient is different. They would take this test to see if it's safe for them to drive using technology for a particular amount of THC. The science may be coming.

#### **IN ADDITION TO INITIATIVES, YOU'VE WORKED ON MEDICAL MARIJUANA LEGISLATION. TELL US ABOUT YOUR PATHWAY TO THE LEGISLATURE.**

I was one of many volunteers trying for years to get a medical marijuana law passed in Illinois. I was a 17 year old kid when I first visited the Legislature to educate my state representative. I walked in and we were both wearing black pants and a pink sweater. I thought to myself, "This is going to be easy." I smiled, handed her a folder filled with scientific evidence and thought that was all I needed to do. I was so naïve! She was very mean and dismissed me with, "I'll take your opinion into account, but I read more than just what people hand me. Marijuana has no medical value." That was my wake-up call. That

was who we were up against.

It proved to be very hard to pass a bill. Every year we came very close. Every year we were let down. But just this month [Aug 2013], Governor Pat Quinn finally signed the medical marijuana bill. It's a different governor, a different sponsor, a different bill than the one I worked on. But today it finally became law, and my former dismissive state representative even voted for it. The lesson -- Never give up!

#### **I SECOND THAT EMOTION! TELL US A LITTLE ABOUT YOURSELF. WHAT IS THE MEANING OF YOUR NAME?**

Shaleen is an Indian name meaning polite and gentle. My parents immigrated to the US from India in the 70s, before I was born. While they were never part of the pro--cannabis culture in India and they are still very much "anti-drug", they became supportive of my work as they learned about the injustice surrounding the war on drugs. Both are retired, my father was an engineer, my mother generally took care of us. I'm due to have a baby myself in October.

#### **YOU HAVE A BROAD BACKGROUND. I SEE YOU WENT TO BUSINESS SCHOOL BEFORE LAW SCHOOL.**



photo Hamilton Wedding Photography



photo Alison Heckard

I wanted to become an accountant or tax attorney.

#### WHY?

(laughs) I'm good at it.

#### HOW DID THAT WORK OUT?

While working in tax law, I developed a rare condition, called Sarcoidosis, an autoimmune disease with flare-ups that can be aggravated by stress. I was already moving toward activism and drug policy and I decided to quit my job. Then the position at LEAP opened up. Once I started my new job there, my symptoms immediately went down. I am a strong believer that when you're working on something you believe in, your body will be in harmony with your

change for decades and are responsible for the cultural shift that caused this victory.

#### THANK YOU FOR RECOGNIZING THE WORK OF OTHERS. WHAT LESSONS DID YOU LEARN?

We all learned, it's important to be open-minded and focus on common messages. That is the key. My generation should focus on this true shift that has occurred, where the majority has come over to our side due to the work of the generation before us.

Yet still, there is sometimes an inherited attitude of pessimism about ending prohibition. Even if it once was true that the issue of marijuana legalization was a "political third rail", it

mind. If it's not, it will tell you.

A few years later, I gravitated toward the Amendment 64 Campaign and asked if I could help. I just happened to get in on the last six months, the tail end of it. My age and timing – coincidental factors – made me lucky to be involved in such a major and historic victory. I am so grateful for the tireless work of people who have been advocating for

no longer is true. We should learn from our predecessors and embrace how popular it is now.



photo Kim Sidwell

Women for Amendment 64

## AFTERWORD

**DUE TO HER** exemplary dedication to social justice, Shaleen Title is like a mother to the marijuana movement's finest aspects—LEAP, SSDP, NORML Women's Alliance, Colorado's Amendment 64.

She is a seasoned activist, mindful of her goal—uniting all people into a connected whole to end the "Drug War" and the "mass incarceration" that fuels and finances it.

She is focused on ending marijuana prohibition, even though she is not a marijuana user herself.

Having been trained narrowly as a tax lawyer, she is the opposite—expansive in her advocacy of inclusiveness.

Her advice: "create a diverse group as part of the process from the start... and make sure the board and leadership have plenty of women, people of color, non-marijuana users, people in recovery... and (others) not typical of the movement."

Born in America to parents newly immigrated from India, Shaleen's world view is international; her moral view is non-judgemental; her social view is justice and fairness for all; her legal view is to build broad community-based coalitions to accomplish that.

After 13 years of experience in the drug policy reform movement, being mentored and now mentoring, when Shaleen read her co-workers' comments, she was moved to tears, saying, "These are people I admire."

Judging by her peers' perceptions, Shaleen has succeeded in winning hearts and minds. 🙌