



## **EMBARGOED**

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# **Cannabis equity coalition takes stand against racist attacks on Black-operated business in Harvard Square**

*New campaign aims to combat systemic racism in Cambridge's Harvard Square*

**CAMBRIDGE, MA** - A neighborhood association's overtly racist comments and controversial opposition to a Black-owned and locally operated business in upscale Harvard Square, a heavily commercialized neighborhood of Cambridge, MA, have spurred a leading cannabis equity coalition to launch a citywide public awareness campaign to bring awareness to the systemic racism in Cambridge which maintains the economic status quo and which seeks to thwart plans for the business to operate in its proposed location.

The new public awareness campaign by the [Real Action for Cannabis Equity \(R.A.C.E.\)](#) coalition will include television and social media advertisements, mailings to area residents, and more, all aimed at protecting and ensuring opportunity for Black and minority-operated businesses like those that have been recently opposed by the [Harvard Square Neighborhood Association](#) (HSNA).

In Massachusetts and across the nation, the emerging cannabis industry has been marred by widespread and well-documented failures to ensure the equitable distribution of licenses to minority entrepreneurs and to other economic empowerment applicants. Advocates say these inequities further compound the incarceration and brutalization that misguided and inequitably enforced prohibition policies have disproportionately wrought upon Black and Brown communities.

Meanwhile, even when minority operators have secured state-certified cannabis licenses, many have often faced obstacles and prejudice when attempting to obtain commercial lease agreements. Recently, **Damond Hughes**, a Massachusetts state-certified economic empowerment license-holder and third generation retail store operator, was able to overcome that obstacle when he obtained a lease agreement from one of Harvard Square's only commercial landlords who is a person of color.

"Securing the commercial lease for our store was a dream come true. We are appropriately zoned for this location and have developed solid plans to mitigate cueing and other issues. We are glad to have the support of so many allies of racial justice from within the R.A.C.E. coalition and beyond as we move forward to advance equity in Harvard Square," said Hughes, who will operate the store in a commercially zoned space at 57 JFK Street, Cambridge, which has previously been vacated by national office supply chain **Staples**.

The new retail cannabis store at 57 JFK Street will be known as *Cookies*, and in addition to being minority-operated and minority-owned, the store will bring a leading minority-owned industry brand that has an equity-centered mission to a neighborhood that is acutely lacking minority-owned and operated businesses.

The store will also attract much-needed foot traffic to the Square as local businesses - and particularly restaurants - recover from the pandemic. Hughes has well-formulated plans not only to reduce queuing through mobile alerts for customers waiting to pick up their completed orders, but he also plans to use those technologies to encourage them to patronize local restaurants and other shops while waiting for their orders. The plan will bring a much-needed boost to struggling Harvard Square restaurants and businesses.

### **Cambridge City Council moratorium upheld by Massachusetts Courts**

In 2019, the **Cambridge City Council** took an important step forward to combat inequities in the cannabis industry when it passed a two-year moratorium regulation that would prioritize the applications of economic empowerment applicants, such as those seeking to fulfill their lease at 57 JFK Street. That moratorium was recently upheld by the Massachusetts Courts.

"We have to actively work to prevent the cannabis industry from becoming another chapter in a long history of racial inequality," **City of Cambridge Mayor Sumbul**

**Siddiqui** said last year at a State House press conference to support the moratorium and to announce the launch of the R.A.C.E. coalition. Siddiqui was a city councilor at the time of the event.

“The moratorium... would give [economic empowerment applicants] enough time to establish their business before they need to compete with the registered marijuana dispensaries and other business interests that seek to dominate the market,” said **Cambridge City Councilor Quinton Zondervan**, also in support of the moratorium at the same event.

### **Fallout from perceived segregation attempts by HSNA spreads; Blier’s University role scrutinized**

HSNA members are now threatening those equity goals supported by city councilors and the Mayor as HSNA members have launched a series of misleading and what many consider racist attacks in an effort to segregate Hughes’ store away from and in a less “visible” location compared to the other predominantly white-owned and operated stores in the Square.

“There are plenty of basements,” **Harvard University Prof. Suzanne Preston Blier** said when she expressed the Neighborhood Association’s opposing position to the idea of Damond’s team occupying a prominent location in the Square.

News of Blier’s comments spread quickly among the minority entrepreneurs who comprise the R.A.C.E. coalition. Some were quick to point out that Blier, who is white, is listed as an African-American Studies professor on the [Harvard University](#) website.

“The assertion that a legitimate, black-owned business is only worthy of ‘basement accommodations’ in the exclusive and iconic Harvard Square reeks of the privilege and racism that is prevalent in the emerging cannabis industry,” said **Richard Harding**, founder of the R.A.C.E. coalition. “It is unfortunate, yet not surprising, that Professor Blier’s comments reawaken old sentiments and validate fresh fears of the racism that is toxic in America today. I am hopeful that her Jim Crow mindset and commentary do not represent the sentiments or character of the good people of Harvard Square.”

The basement comment, among others by the HSNA telling Hughes and his team to choose a less “visible” location raised immediate comparisons to segregationist policies among the coalition. According to racial justice advocates, the comments and

opposition exemplified the inequitable treatment and lack of support that many Black entrepreneurs say they face when attempting to open their businesses in prominent, properly zoned commercial locations.

"As an advocate for real action in cannabis equity, the economic empowerment community will not stand by idly and watch minority-business owners relegated to second- and third-rate business locations," said Harding. "To achieve true equity in the cannabis industry, institutional racism and bias must not prevail, and the obscene bias displayed by some prominent members of HSBA cannot be tolerated in a community that claims to hold progressive values sacred and just."

In their oppositional statements, the HSNA also essentially ignored the fact that multiple white Harvard Square landlords had turned down the Black operators attempts to secure a commercial lease, until a commercial landlord who is a person of color intervened.

### **Entrepreneurs remain hopeful**

Hughes said he does not think the HSNA's racist comment is indicative of the broader sentiments of Cambridge, although he and his supporters have pointed to the troubling lack of minority owned property and minority owned businesses in Cambridge as a reflection point for the city which has a reputation for being progressive and forward thinking. That reputation does not cure the city of situations like the racist remarks and opposition from HSNA, but nonetheless, Hughes says he remains optimistic about the prospect of opening his store in a visible Harvard Square location, without being relegated to a "narrower entrance", less "visible" location, or "basement" as suggested by Blier.

"We are hopeful that the City Council, the Planning Board, the Business Association and others will see the importance of welcoming a Black-operated, minority-owned, and minority-hosted business to the Harvard Square community," said Hughes.

In addition to helping his family to operate a third generation liquor store started by his grandfather who had to gain his license under a white 'straw buyer', Hughes has been a fixture in the Cambridge and Boston communities as both an employee of the public schools and as a real estate professional. He hopes operating and co-owning his own store in a prominent Harvard Square location will serve as a signal and inspiration to other minority entrepreneurs that they, too, can pursue their dreams in Cambridge.

“I see this as an opportunity for Cambridge to not only voice its support for Black Lives Matter, but to also unify against systemic racism, which always seeks to divide and conquer,” says Hughes. “I certainly hope that the Neighborhood Association will reconsider its position. We’re a local team and we want the opportunity to work with the Association and local businesses to develop our plans for the proposed location.”

### **Further background**

It should be noted that the logistics of Cookies’ proposed location – foot traffic, demographics, and access to public transit – give it a strong chance for success, whereas consigning it to some “basement” location would likely result in its failure. Research shows that the location of a business is one of the most important factors determining its success and how it is perceived by the public. That’s why more than fifty Black former McDonald’s franchisees recently filed suit in federal court against the fast-food giant, alleging they were racially discriminated against and denied the same opportunities as white franchisees because of how they were treated and where their businesses were placed.

Known for its numerous dining and shopping options and active location, Harvard Square’s business makeup has never come close to reflecting the city’s [diversity](#) (67 percent of residents identify as white). And to assume that Cookies’ minority owners or their customers would be more disruptive to Winthrop Park than many other alcohol-serving establishments that surround it reeks of racism.

In fact, the Cookies brand has a longstanding history of being a respected member of its communities. Cannabis cultivators affiliated with Cookies played a major role in early HIV/AIDS [activism](#), supporting the movement of people living with HIV/AIDS who used the drug to cope with taxing symptoms.

While there is much said in the HSNA’s mission about preserving the Square’s [architectural and historic features](#), there is no mention in its mission of advocating for or supporting equity or inclusion among businesses in the square. Ironically, while the group’s website proclaims, “all are welcome,” and pledges to celebrate everyone [“regardless of skin color”](#) HSNA sent a very different message to the Black operators seeking to fulfill their lease of 57 JFK Street during recent meetings.

The Cambridge City Council took an important step forward to combat these kinds of barriers and inequities last year when it passed the aforementioned two-year moratorium regulation that would empower economic empowerment applicants to have the first opportunities to open locations like the one proposed for 57 JFK Street.

Ironically, the HSNA argued that a primary concern was that the proposed store would bring too many customers – including potential customers who would support other Harvard Square businesses – to the Winthrop Park area.

And yet, the HSNA simultaneously said it would consider supporting the store if it were in the “basement” – which would still bring those same customers to an identical address. R.A.C.E. coalition members say the economic empowerment laws of the Commonwealth were designed to combat exactly these kinds of attempts at commercial redlining and the subjugation of businesses operated by economic empowerment applicants.

Now, the R.A.C.E. coalition says its campaign will help ensure the intent and potential of those regulations and the Cambridge moratorium are fulfilled in a manner that also helps to confront and to combat the systemic racism that exists among the institutional power structures of Harvard Square, including and beyond the HSNA.

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## ABOUT R.A.C.E

*The mission of the R.A.C.E. coalition and movement is to unite, empower, and create maximum opportunity for communities and people of color within the emerging cannabis industry with a specific aim to raise up the voices of cannabis business owners and workers of color.*

*Founded and led by entrepreneurs and business owners of color within the cannabis industry, R.A.C.E. seeks to advance the interests of our community and of industrial equity through economic liberation, self-determination, business ownership, the rejection of tokenism, and through the promotion of community empowerment, skills-building, and political advocacy.*

*Whereas prohibition was weaponized against communities and people of color to stoke criminalization, brutality and incarceration, R.A.C.E. seeks and promotes avenues by*

*which cannabis legalization may lead to the economic empowerment for entrepreneurs, workers, and communities of color in an era of rampant wage inequality, racial inequality, and prejudicial treatment by major institutions against entrepreneurs and workers of color.*