



A majority of the executive team at the medical marijuana company Sweet Dirt in Eliot is comprised of women. From left to right, they are: Angela Boyle, Rebecca Henry, co-founder Kristin Pope, Tori Staples, April Royce, and Jessica Oliver.

WOMEN AT THE HELM

A cannabis company thrives in Eliot



STORY BY R. COOK // PHOTOS BY MICHAEL WILSON

Sweet Dirt in Eliot is one of several cannabis companies in Maine that have really taken flight since Maine voters legalized adult use cannabis nearly four years ago. Over the past two years, the company has been working tirelessly to build a fully vertically integrated cannabis organization. Leading that charge is a seasoned executive team—two-thirds of whom are women—more than twice the national average. This, in an industry recognized as being more “women-friendly” than traditional industries.

Kristin Pope, Sweet Dirt’s co-founder with her husband, Hughes, Jessica Oliver, April Royce, Rebecca Henry, Tori Staples, and Angela Boyle are truly a force to be reckoned with, thanks to their talent, experience, and the company’s culture that gives them powerful voices.

Sweet Dirt was founded by Kristin and Hughes in 2016. Just prior to that, Hughes had been working in cultivation for one of Maine’s eight licensed medical marijuana dispensaries. Seeing an opportunity to grow and provide small-batch, organically grown medical cannabis, Sweet Dirt was quickly recognized for its quality and commitment to clean cannabis. Kristin drew on her degree in women’s studies and her training as a doula and as a certified yoga teacher. Her interest in health, wellness, and plant medicine has helped to create Sweet Dirt’s cannabis-infused products. She has also been instrumental in creating Maine Coast Hemp, Sweet Dirt’s sister company.

“In the beginning, it was just me and Hughes,” Kristin recalled. Now, the company is comprised of nearly two dozen employees and countless contractors and artisans, many of them women. The company is building both medical and adult use retail stores and a manufacturing facility. It is also constructing a new state-of-the-art 32,800 square-foot green-

house that will house thousands of plants annually.

Kristin says she didn’t intentionally set out to hire so many women to help run the day-to-day operations of the company. “It just really happened organically.” The company is now poised to hire as many as 150 people in the next 18 months and open more than four retail stores in Waterville and Portland by year’s end.

Rebecca Henry, vice president of marketing, was the first woman to join Kristin on the Sweet Dirt executive team. A mother of five, she was thrilled by the company’s culture of inclusivity and the flexibility afforded by a “family friendly company.”

Previously, Rebecca spent over 20 years in marketing in the technology sector. Though she does not hail from the cannabis industry, Kristin and other members of the team are always ready and willing to teach her. “I’m constantly asking questions and love the challenge of a new market and industry.” Rebecca looks forward to elevating the perception of and conversation around cannabis.

April Royce, who lives in Wells, came from a manufacturing background, which she describes as a boys’ club where she often felt her suggestions were ignored. Despite those obstacles, April built an impressive resume in the financial side of the manufacturing industry and as a job creator. She was drawn to the culture at Sweet Dirt and the promise of alternative medical treatments. She actually joined the team shortly after Sweet Dirt suffered a devastating fire in June 2019 that nearly wiped out all of its crops and its cultivation facility. April put together the business income valuations needed to help Sweet Dirt recover from that fire.

Kristin recalled that their patients, investors, and others rallied around them following the fire. “We had an overwhelm-

ingly positive attitude internally as well as externally.” She says that she and the team kept asking themselves the key questions, “How will we rebuild and how will we make it bigger and better?”

Jessica Oliver had only been with Sweet Dirt as a consultant for two weeks before the fire happened. She formally joined the company in September 2019, as vice president of cannabis operations. She grew up in South Portland and spent five years at New England’s then-largest medical cannabis dispensary. She then set out on her own, offering project management and operations consulting for the cannabis industry, working with companies across five states. “I see cannabis as the ultimate disruptor, and I wanted to get here to be part of that ride.” Jessica has been instrumental in defining the company’s retail strategy and helping the company navigate Maine’s varied ordinances and regulations across jurisdictions.

Tori Staples of Windham previously worked in the radiology department at Maine Medical Center. She had tired of the medical establishment’s criticism of medical marijuana and CBD as effective treatment. She transitioned into the medical marijuana industry, specializing in start-ups. She had also worked for six years at Maine’s largest medical dispensary. Just prior to joining Sweet Dirt, she spent two years in Hawaii helping open a medical marijuana dispensary there. Now that she works at Sweet Dirt as the director of post-harvest processing, “I don’t have to worry about my moral compass of big pharmaceutical versus cannabis.”

One of the reasons she returned to Maine was because she sensed the state was more progressive on allowing medical marijuana dispensaries to grow. Like other members of the team, Tori continues to learn about the medical marijuana

industry. Jess serves as Tori’s mentor and notes that Jess “will not settle for anything that is not right.”

Angela Boyle, the director of retail, has been living in Eliot since 2003 with her husband and four kids. One day she came across Sweet Dirt’s Eliot cultivation facility and medical store. She pulled in and decided to apply. Thanks to the affirming culture at Sweet Dirt, Angela feels comfortable as she learns about the industry. She combines her growing knowledge at Sweet Dirt with her 22 years of retail management, a combination that is viewed as a great asset to the company.

April noted that the willingness of her employers to take new employees under their wing is commendable. “They don’t care where you came from as long as you are willing to learn and develop and be part of the team.”

The future looks very bright for Sweet Dirt. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, Sweet Dirt has continued to dispense its medical marijuana prescriptions and CBD products to its patients via curb-side pickup. Rebecca notes that medical marijuana is the third largest industry in Maine (just behind potatoes and lobsters). She said a great deal of that growth here in Maine and nationwide is driven by women, with studies showing that women make the overwhelming majority of the caregiving and wellness decisions in their households.

Kristen also sees a bright future for women who want to enter the medical marijuana industry. She believes more women will get into the cultivation side of the business, which will be “a gamechanger for the industry as a whole.”

Regardless of the ups and downs Sweet Dirt has experienced or may face in the new COVID-19 world, April beamed with great confidence, “We’re ready to face whatever challenges that come at us.” •



Kristin Pope, co-founder of Sweet Dirt.