Al Harrington is Founder and CEO of Viola Brands, a purpose-driven cannabis company named after his grandmother, Viola Harrington. Previously, Al was one of the youngest NBA players in history and played in the League for 16 seasons. Currently, Al is an active member of the Minority Cannabis Business Association (MCBA) and sits on Tidal Royalty’s Advisory Board.

VIOLA IS OPERATING IN FOUR STATES NOW. POTENTIALLY, WE’LL BE IN SIX OR SEVEN STATES BY THE FOURTH QUARTER OF THIS YEAR.

Great NBA Veterans introduced me to the League. Super Veterans. I was drafted out of high school and I give these guys a lot of credit for the work ethic that I have. I played for the NBA for 16 years and my cannabis journey started during that time. When I signed with the Denver Nuggets, in 2010, I went to a market where cannabis was legal, medicinally. I was always reading in the newspaper about how cannabis helped with different ailments. At the end of that season, my grandmother came to see me play. She was 79-years-old...
and she was complaining about eyesight pain she had from glaucoma. I told her about an article I was reading two days before, about cannabis helping with glaucoma. ‘What is this I keep calling cannabis?’ she asked. I told her it was marijuana. She was like, ‘You outta your mind? I’m not smoking reefer!’ I said, ‘No, Grandma, this is what doctors are saying. Give it a try.’ The next day, I was able to convince her. I came back to check on her and she was looking down. ‘Grandma, you feeling OK?’ She turned around, crying, she said, ‘I haven’t read the words of my Bible for over three years, until now.’

That following year, I invested in my cultivation facility, in Colorado—12,000 square feet. I first learned about the industry from the medicinal side—the endocannabinoid system, the CB receptors, the health benefits of cannabis. Most of my first patients had either HIV or cancer. So, learning about the plant, while trying to survive and to stay in business, that was my focus for the first four years. The regulatory environment was definitely the biggest and trickiest part of navigating this business. Especially for someone like myself. Because I’m high profile, because, obviously, I’m someone who could potentially be made an example, I always have to double check, triple check, quadruple check that everything is just right.

Once I started going to different events, and winning awards, I realized I was the only person in the room that looked like me. Obviously, that became a huge issue because the war on drugs has been aimed towards Black and brown communities. We have brothers and sisters with minor drug offenses still locked up in states where people are making millions, even billions of dollars.

I use my company as a platform to change that—and, to create opportunities for people of color to participate...
in the industry, financial opportunities. Right now, only about 4% of businesses are Black and minority owned. To me that’s a shame. One of my goals is to use our incubator program to create 100 millionaires in the next three years. This is generational wealth, right, and we’ve got to figure out how talented, Black entrepreneurs and Black-owned businesses can participate. Obviously, we all know it’s very hard to raise capital. But I always say, when you are Black entrepreneur you got to be 10 times as good. That’s how we got here, by being 10 times as good.

I feel like this is a unique time in the world. You see all these big corporations deciding that they want to invest in communities or give back. Give back doesn’t mean just give somebody $10,000 and send them on their way. Take that $10,000 and teach them how to fish, teach them how to create their own wealth. That’s what it’s about—creating jobs. That’s the way that we have real impact, give somebody a true opportunity so they can excel and continue to build on that opportunity.

Companies like mine, Black owned companies, can really connect with people, help educate them and help get records expunged. We have a partnership with Root and Rebound, where we focus on re-entry—helping people get back into society after nonviolent drug offenses—find jobs, places to live and eventually employment.

We’re just in the beginning of what is going to be a trillion-dollar industry. There’s going to be more money and more opportunity—enough for everybody in this space. You just got to do it the right way. So I would just say, take a deep dive and reach out to me. Cannabis is here to stay. I’m in it for the rest of my life. This is going to be a legacy play, for me and my family.”

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