

Momma's Hemp opens on Main St.

BY ALLISON BROPHY CHAMPION

CULPEPER STAR-EXPONENT

Devin Pullen believes in the potential healing properties of CBD so much that he recently opened a shop on Main Street selling many variations of the hemp-derived product out of a desire to help others.

"I first got into CBD a few years ago because it

changed it my life when I started having anxiety," said the 21-year-old Culpeper resident. "I was dealing with anxiety so much that I couldn't even live in life, but once I started taking CBD, the anxiety was gone."

After attending Liberty High School in Fauquier, Pullen went to work

doing landscaping and plumbing with his dad and grandfather. He traveled out west and learned about the possibilities for CBD. Then, on July 1, with support from his family, Pullen opened Momma's Hemp in downtown Culpeper.

"I thought if CBD could change my life, it could

change a whole lot of other people's lives," he said.

Pullen named the store for his mother, Jennifer Bright, who has been with him every step of the way. Recently laid off and with a background in customer service, she is the store manager.

Seeing her son suffer

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Hemp

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was hard.

"We had gone to the ER and doctors," Bright said. But after her son learned about CBD, she said, "I've seen him grow into a happy person," Bright said. "It's transformed him into a wonderful person—he wants everyone to experience it."

Cannabidiol, or CBD, is a non-psychoactive compound extracted from hemp that does not cause a "high." In fact, scientific research shows it to be highly effective in reducing the number of seizures in childhood epilepsy syndromes, according to the U.S. Food & Drug Administration.

Misunderstood and criminalized for decades, hemp was made legal nationwide as part of last year's Farm Bill. In March, Virginia changed the definition of marijuana to mirror federal law.

Now, Virginia allows for "finished" hemp-derived products, such as CBD, as long as they contain no more than 0.3 percent THC, or tetrahydrocannabinol, the psychoactive ingredient in marijuana. As a result, CBD is seeing a resurgence of interest and investment as entrepreneurs like Pullen take a chance on the ancient plant that traces its history of use to ancient times.

There's a West Coast feel inside Momma's Hemp, located at 146 N. Main St., a few doors down from the bail bondman. The color scheme is beachy and the products reminiscent of a California smoke shop.

The store offers more than 50 different CBD products, all legal for those 18 and older, including capsules, truffles, gummies, oils, drinks, chocolate bars, tea, tinctures, lotions, patches and "flower" for smoking.

Marijuana is now legal for recreational use in 11 states plus D.C., and legal for medical use in another 22 states. Pullen said he thinks the plant has been demonized for so long due to legislative influence by big pharmaceutical companies.

"Big Pharma has billions of dollars to support what they're doing. Why would they want anything else that they can't control?" he said. "It's like any other medicine a doctor would tell you to take that big Pharma doesn't own."

Pullen, thanks to CBD, said he is now able to control his anxiety.

"I smoke the flower every day," he said. "A lot of my anxiety comes from not being able to sleep at night, so it helps with that. It just makes your day go by easier. When you see it work, you believe it."

Pullen warned against buying "fake" CBD products from gas stations or corner stores, saying all of the products at Momma's Hemp are the most reputable brands, selected based on user reviews and ratings, and how long the manufacturing companies have been in business.

The locally sold selection comes from sellers in California, Colorado or Oregon, where marijuana is legal, he said, and where lab testing is more stringent.

Around back at Momma's Hemp, Pullen stepped behind the counter of his "flower bar" and opened containers of what looked a lot like marijuana, but is actually CBD.

"We put it on this side because of the whole mix-up that it's real weed," he said. "Some people don't want to come in and look at that—they just want to



Devin Pullen talks about uses for CBD inside his new store on Main Street in Culpeper.



Momma's Hemp CBD Shop opened July 1 at 146 N. Main St. in downtown Culpeper.

see lotion."

The fact that the CBD flower looks like marijuana flower (illegal in Virginia) can pose a problem, Pullen acknowledged, mentioning efforts by Virginia state labs to develop new field tests to help law enforcement officers recognize the difference.

"It will take time for people to accept it," Pullen said. "For them to accept,

oh, he doesn't have a weed shop down there."

At Momma's Hemp, the flower sells for about \$40 per eighth of an ounce and is available in various strains. Indica-based CBD aids rest and relaxation while the sativa variety is more uplifting, Pullen said.

He supports full legalization in Virginia, saying CBD is a good starting point. It's better than the

alternative of people dying every day from opioid addiction, Pullen added.

"There are a lot of laws that have to change," he said. "For things to get better, a lot has to change. The old ways ain't working no more. It's been happening—it's here in Virginia. The change is coming."

Momma'sHempintends to expand its inventory to include clothes made from

hemp and other products.

"This is just the beginning," said Bright. "It's been great reaching out to people who come in here and say, 'Ok, tell me about it. I want to experience it.' It's been great watching people get excited. Then they come back to purchase again."

Pullen's girlfriend, Alondra Tellez, is a sales associate in the shop. She has high hopes.

"I think it's awesome that he opened this store to get CBD out to the community more and see if it actually helps people," she

said. Pullen said he didn't have to meet any special regulations or get any extra permits to open the unique shop.

"You just need a business license and make sure the town accepts that you are able to sell here," he said.

Earlier this month, Culpeper Renaissance, Inc., the town's Virginia Main Street program, held a ribbon cutting to celebrate the opening of Momma's Hemp.

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Honey Hill Hemp sprouts purpose in Culpeper County

BY ALLISON BROPHY CHAMPION

CULPEPER STAR-EXPONENT

LIGNUM—A field of more than 2,500 hemp plants flowers in eastern Culpeper County on a small farm where two men have taken a chance on reviv-

ing an ancient crop that until recently was illegal to grow in the United States.

Neighbors Mike Sauer and David Combs share an ardor for cultivating hemp, which they planted in June on three

acres behind Sauer's farmhouse in Lignum. They named their business Honey Hill Hemp.

Each of the business partners is driven by wanting to grow the plant to support

production of cannabidiol, or CBD, a nonpsychoactive hemp byproduct used to treat childhood seizures.

Sauer, 46, is a reformed IT executive who left behind his

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corporate career to become a hemp farmer out of a desire to get back to the earth, help others, and have more time with his wife and four children, who range in age from 7 to 12.

"I wanted to be with my kids because they are only going to be kids for so long," he said. "I had a serious decision to make—do I want to go back and chase the dollar and work for corporate America? I was making a good living, but it just wasn't me. I needed to decompress and get back to nature."

Sauer also wants to be part of the CBD supply chain.

"If one of my children was in that situation, having seizures, and I could help my child with a naturally derived substance from a plant rather than a pharmaceutical, I'm all over that," he said.

Combs is a 28-year-old Army veteran who survived an explosive blast in Afghanistan in 2010 when a Soviet rocket hit a building and shrapnel struck him in the knee. Seven surgeries and four years later, the Lignum native made it back home, albeit broken.

"When I got out of the military, things were rough for a while," said the graduate of Culpeper's Eastern View High School. "It took a bit of adjustment. I still suffer from pain."

The U.S. Veterans Administration prescribed opioids and psychiatric drugs. Combs tried CBD and found it to be much more effective at helping him live with the symptoms of his wartime injury.

"I threw away the opioids. I stopped filling the prescriptions," he said.

Using CBD oil has allowed Combs to start hiking again, something he thought his injury had taken away.

"I have three daughters and I can take them hiking, spend time with them, live a fuller life because of it," said Combs.

The Lignum native grew up gardening with his grandfather, who also raised fruit trees. The old trees stopped bearing, so they replanted, said Combs.

"We have about 75 fruit trees right now—16 different varieties of apples, pear," he said.

Getting back into agriculture helped quiet the clamor of war.

"Originally, it was a therapeutic outlet for me when I got out of the military. I just wanted a simpler life again," Combs said. "Now, this opportunity has come along, and I feel CBD and CBD products have a lot of potential to help veterans with PTSD and other issues."

Changing laws

Effective March 21, Virginia legislators amended the state's hemp laws to match the rules in the 2018 federal farm bill passed by Congress, which legalized cultivation of the plant for the first time since the 1930s.

The Farm Bill defines hemp as the cannabis plant, the same one that produces marijuana, according to the Brookings Institution. But there is one major difference—hemp cannot contain more than 0.3 percent THC, the compound associated with getting people high.

Virginia farmers can now grow hemp to produce CBD and other products. Its agricultural production is a growing revolution.

As of Aug. 20, the Virginia Department of Agriculture & Consumer Sciences had



HONEY HILL HEMP
A flower buds on a plant at Honey Hill Hemp.

issued 955 Industrial Hemp Grower Registrations, 191 Industrial Hemp Processor Registrations and 55 Industrial Hemp Dealer Registrations, according to Jasmine Harwell, the department's Industrial Hemp Program coordinator.

Culpeper County has six registered growers, including Honey Hill Hemp, and two registered processors, she said.

Hemp now planted in Virginia covers 10,100 acres or 10 million square feet, department spokeswoman Elaine Lidholm said.

In 2012, the Virginia Industrial Hemp Coalition formed to lobby for the growing and commercialization of hemp in the state. The group now has more than 400 members, said Jason Amatucci, president of the coalition based in Nellysford in Nelson County.

"Our goals are to build the networks of the Virginia hemp industry and to keep fighting for our rights regarding this beneficial plant," Amatucci said. "Our current mission is to get our government to treat hemp and the people that grow, process and sell it with the same respect they give other crops and other businesses. We will continue to educate and use grassroots political advocacy to get there. It's not a matter of if that will happen, but when."

Last year, four public universities with state-approved hemp research programs planted about 135 acres of industrial hemp, including at the Orange County plantation home of the fourth U.S. president.

That was part of the University of Virginia's "Founding Fathers" initiative to grow a three-fiber variety. To raise public awareness of commonwealth's history as a hemp-growing state at James Madison's Montpelier in Orange and at George Washington's Mount Vernon estate on the Potomac River in Fairfax County.

Hemp revival

On a rainy day in late July, Sauer gave a tour around Honey Hill Hemp so named for the extensive beekeeping operation also on site. Raising bees was an inter-



ALLISON BROPHY CHAMPION/CULPEPER STAR-EXPONENT
David Combs tamps down dirt in a potted hemp seedling at Honey Hill Hemp in Lignum.

est he shared with Combs, who also raises hives on his nearby farm.

"The bees came first after my career in IT and what I would consider a high stress, high pressure environment," said Sauer, who grew up in the suburbs of New Jersey.

"Bees are amazing—what goes on inside of a colony and how that colony works collectively together for the good of the colony. It's not one bee for himself."

The bees will not pollinate the hemp crop and their honey isn't being harvested. The bees are on site strictly to promote the pollinators, Sauer said. He runs an outreach site on Facebook, Be Happy Honey Bees, and touts the homeopathic nature of honey, including potential relief for allergy sufferers.

"For me, this is therapeutic," Sauer said. "My new philosophy is I do things for a cause, for a reason, and let everything else fall into place."

His interest in bees grew into an interest in hemp farming as Sauer watched from the sidelines when the laws started to change.

"It came as a surprise to me in March of this year that Virginia was on board with it," he said, noting the many uses for hemp beside CBD.

Approached by Sauer about growing hemp, Combs said, "Let's go for it, a hemp revival. I was very much so excited to get into it."

Experimental farming

Besides CBD, industrial hemp can be used to make a wide range of products, including foods and beverages, cosmetics and personal-care products, nutritional supplements, fabrics and textiles, yarns and spun fibers, paper, construction and insulation materials,

and other manufactured goods, according to a June 2018 report, "Hemp as an Agricultural Commodity" by the Congressional Research Service.

Industry estimates in 2018 reported U.S. hemp product sales at nearly \$700 million annually, CRS reports.

Combs believes local hemp production will boost the local economy, pointing to all the items they purchased locally to get their operation off the ground, such as irrigation system and greenhouse supplies, weed barriers, drip tape, Pro-Mix, hoses, fittings, valves and injection systems.

Sauer said the Virginia Department of Agriculture & Consumer Sciences has been very welcoming, encouraging, and great to work with on the endeavor.

The department requires a police background check prior to licensing, along with a \$50 annual fee. The Honey Hill Hemp partners have submitted planting reports, as required, and expect random inspections.

In addition to their Lignum plot, Honey Hill Hemp has another growing operation with 500 test plants on eight acres in the Shenandoah Valley being overseen by Sauer's father. Sauer said it looks promising.

At the Culpeper hemp farm, the business partners built an irrigation system, providing necessary water on the many recent hot and dry days. Valves turn on different zones for irrigation on the fields.

They experimented with location—hemp grows better in well-drained soil on top of the hill, they found. They tried different types of seeds and seedlings, ultimately selecting high-CBD, low-THC varieties with brand names such as

Virginia Gold, Cherry Blossom, Berry Blossom and "The Wife."

Combs savors the process, though it's been hard work and a learning process, he said.

"The art of growing it, the skills and the technique, have been lost through the years," he said.

Hemp, a weed, is really not that hard to grow, Combs added.

"It just has its own particulars, like when it gets to full bloom or budding, it gets top heavy," he said. "We have to deal with the wind, and it has a high nitrogen requirement, similar to corn in that aspect."

Knowing when to harvest before mold sets in is important to not losing the entire crop, Combs added: "There is a fine line in the wet season of September when to harvest when the buds are in full bloom."

Reflecting on his own CBD use, the veteran said he can't scientifically prove that it cured him.

"But I do believe that has mellowing or relaxing properties. Yes, I do think it did help me," said Combs.

He remembered how frenzied the corporate world made Sauer.

"It was just driving him batty. Now, we work more hours than we ever did," Combs said, laughing. "It needs to be a labor of love. It has a potential to go well,

but it also has a potential to flop."

A shared purpose

That's why they started small, Sauer said, noting they are poised for growth. As of Tuesday, he said, the hemp flowers on site looked and smelled wonderful, similar to marijuana but without the THC.

Sauer said he doesn't expect to get rich from growing hemp, saying that he is done chasing the dollar.

Combs embraces the hard word, harkening back to his cause.

"When I am out here in the 100-degree heat digging in the mud, if this helps somebody, it's worth every bit of it," he said.

Honey Hill Hemp will not produce CBD. It will sell the buds it cultivates to a licensed processor who will extract the oil and sell it to someone else for marketing.

Hemp farming speaks to purpose, Sauer added.

"We are doing something for a reason," he said. "I have a soft spot in my heart for kids, and a lot of respect for the military and people like David who went overseas and had his leg blown up protecting our freedoms."

Combs said CBD gave him back the freedom to live his life fully after suffering the traumatic injury that left his knee severely scarred.

He hopes Culpeper will accept and support what they are trying to do, ending decades of hemp being demonized and misunderstood.

"As people get more educated on it and realize its potential therapeutic or homeopathic properties, I think it will be much more accepted in the community," he said.

In addition to growing, Honey Hill Hemp is now providing consulting services for others looking to get into the field. The farm is open by appointment for tours and educational outreach.

Honey Hill Hemp has a presence on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. For information, email Mike. Sauer@honeyhillhemp.com.

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Culpeper leads area for Airbnb host revenue in 2018

BY ALLISON BROPHY CHAMPION

CULPEPER STAR-EXPONENT

Culpeper led the five-county area for income earned last year by Airbnb hosts as the online hospitality service continues to grow in popularity here and around the world.

For one local host family, the platform has provided key supplementary income in retirement while allowing a young mom to stay at home with her young children.

An estimated 4,700 “guest arrivals” were recorded by Airbnb in Culpeper, generating a total of \$551,300 in host income in 2018, the San Francisco-based company recently reported.

Coming in a close second with



A view of one of three upstairs bedrooms at “Old Blue,” a Culpeper County Airbnb.

\$550,000 in host income from 3,400 guest arrivals was Fauquier County followed by 5,000 Airbnb guest arrivals in Orange County, generating \$549,300 for

hosts.

Madison County Airbnb hosts earned \$312,800 last year from a total of 3,100 guest arrivals while Rappahannock County hosts brought in \$396,600 from 2,700 guests, according to the company. The five-county economic impact for Airbnb hosts was more than \$2.3 million.

It’s been nearly two years since Culpeper County resident Debra Cordy, a retiree, and her family started doing short-term rentals of an old farmhouse through Airbnb. She and her husband, also retired, had previously rented the circa 1898 home to long-term tenants before deciding to shift directions.

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Airbnb

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“I thought we could probably make as much money doing an Airbnb as we are doing renting it full-time,” Cordy said.

It was around the same time that the Cordy’s newly married daughter, Rachel Ricci, started her own family and was looking for a way to earn money while staying at home with her two kids, one age 3 and another five months old. An art major with a background in wedding planning and furniture restoration, Ricci was recruited to furnish and decorate “Old Blue.”

A self-employed contractor hired by her parents, Ricci now works one to three days a week cleaning the three-bedroom, 2,600-square-foot home on two levels after guests leave and restocking kitchen and bathroom supplies in preparation for the next guests. She works in the house after her husband gets home from work, allowing her to care for their children and make money.

“It’s huge,” Ricci said. “Such a blessing to give me peace of mind to know I am raising them.”

In 2018, Airbnb guests stayed at Old Blue for a total of 190 days, according to Cordy. The current rate during this historically slow season is \$95 per night, which like hotels varies depending on season.

Situated on two acres just minutes from the town of Culpeper, the house is eclectically and tastefully furnished complete with a cabinet holding board games, war-



ALLISON BROPHY CHAMPION / STAR-EXPONENT

“Old Blue,” an 1898 farmhouse in Culpeper, is one of several dozen Airbnb rentals available in the county. Last year, it was rented out for 190 days by owner Debra Cordy and her husband.

themed décor in a front room, a light and airy kitchen, history books in a built-in library and plush beds. Cordy is an Airbnb-designated “Superhost” who consistently receives high ratings from guests.

“This was our first experience with Airbnb,” wrote one guest of a September stay. “Old Blue and Culpeper is centrally located to many of the Civil War battlefields, Montpelier and Skyline Drive. We happened to have three days that were very hot and humid—Old Blue greeted us after these hot days out on the battlefield trails with wonderful coolness.”

At night lounging outside on a spacious front porch, bushes attract beautiful butterflies while deer grazed in a field, the guest wrote: “We felt at home the minute we walked in and kicked off our shoes.”

Getting the house in such a welcoming condi-

tion took a lot of work, Cordy noted, but it’s been worth it. The situation works as a family effort including Ricci’s regular contributions as well as that of her father, who does all the mowing and repairs.

“We have six children and four live in the area, so whenever we need help all we have to do is call. It’s a family business. I don’t know if I could do it without all of us,” Cordy said.

In addition to bringing the family together, being an Airbnb host has made her appreciate Culpeper a lot more with folks visiting for wedding weekends, Library of Congress events, downtown dining, Civil War history, hiking, cycling, the mountains and more.

“The more we host, the more I respect our town because there really is a lot here,” Cordy said. “It surprises me how many good people there are who are so grateful to have our

house.”

Statewide, Airbnb hosts earned nearly \$104 million last year while welcoming nearly 750,000 guest arrivals. According to the company, there are about 10,200 Virginia hosts who share their homes via Airbnb, typically earning about \$5,500 annually in supplemental income.

“2018 was another great year for Airbnb in Virginia, with more local residents and small businesses able to benefit from the economic opportunities created by home sharing than ever before,” said Liz DeBold Fusco, spokesperson for Airbnb.

A search of Culpeper, Virginia on the site generated listings for 38 properties ranging from “Tiny Treehouse Camping” for \$46 per night to \$1,675 per night for an entire five-bedroom luxury bed and breakfast in wine country.

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