

CT Opinions

Quote of the week

"I cannot say whether things will get better if we change; what I can say is that they must change if they are to get better."

— GEORG LICHTENBERG

Tea Time with Tagwa FAREWELL TO SPRING

TAGWA SHAMMET
Opinions Editor

Tea timers, our spring semester is coming to a close. We have been through a lot together these past few months. From online classes to social injustice, mental health and student deaths, our semester has been anything but simple.

It doesn't seem right to bid the spring farewell without mentioning those who didn't make it to the end. Cody Woodson, Adam Oakes and Daniel Cordeiro-Laske were among those taken from the VCU community far too soon. Their families and friends mourn them every day, and we will remember them always.

That being said, some of those deaths will feel seemingly meaningless if no change is brought forward.

Oakes — who died earlier this semester at a Delta Chi fraternity event — will never get to walk across the graduation stage as many students will next week. His family will never be able to witness his accomplishments and rejoice in his success. His friends will never be able to laugh with him. He will never grow old.

All because of unnecessary, childish and antiquated traditions of hazing in Greek life. VCU must not let Oakes' death be in vain — changes in Greek life are vital. As we leave the semester, it is more important than ever that our

demands for these changes will not leave with the season.

Cordeiro-Laske served as a member of our VCU Student Government Association. Hundreds of VCU community members shared their thoughts on how Cordeiro-Laske positively impacted their life. He will be missed dearly.

Woodson was shot on Gilmer Street, only a few blocks from where our paper is produced, the Student Media Center. Similarly to 19-year-old Oakes, 20-year-old Woodson died during the peak of his college experience. His safety was not a priority of this university.

Student safety is essential to welcoming comfortability on campus. VCU must ensure that all students are safe and out of danger as much as possible. Woodson died a mere walking distance from campus in an area where many students reside. The semester might be ending, but we still have students — including myself — who will be staying around campus for the summer. My safety should not be compromised simply because classes aren't in session.

Last summer, Richmond turned into a beautiful, political playground. Protests against the undeniable police brutality in our nation ensued all throughout the area. Offensive statues, such as the Stonewall Jackson monument, were removed. We demanded social justice.

We went from protesting the injustice against George Floyd last year to watching

justice be served on our own televisions this year. I wish I could say we didn't lose anybody along the way.

But, I can't. Police brutality is as American as apple pie.

We're not oblivious to the realities of the matter: policing in this nation stems from slave patrols. Therefore, the inherent racism in this nation's law enforcement is extremely obvious. Nevertheless, we — the protesters of injustice — stand. We stand to ensure that our lives matter, that Black power is respected and recognized throughout the world — that those meant to protect and serve do so. And if they don't, defund them.

Policing in this nation has proved time and time again to be more of a hassle than it's worth. Instead of funding this historically racist institution, we could be reallocating those funds to help better our American community as a whole. Greater funding and access to resources for poorly subsidized school districts and community centers could help elevate the status of many children of color across the country.

We did all of this while surviving a pandemic. This school year has proved to be difficult. At times, it even felt like I wasn't learning because the Zoom fatigue became unbearable. Switching between my

computer and campus while maintaining social distancing was hard, but we made it through — vaccinated at that.

Our mental health was put to the test. Depression and anxiety were up to bat with remote learning and quarantine. Sometimes, my mental health didn't win, but you better believe it will now that summer is here.

So, farewell to spring. Farewell, tea timers. The semester may be over, but you know I'll be back. And that's the tea.

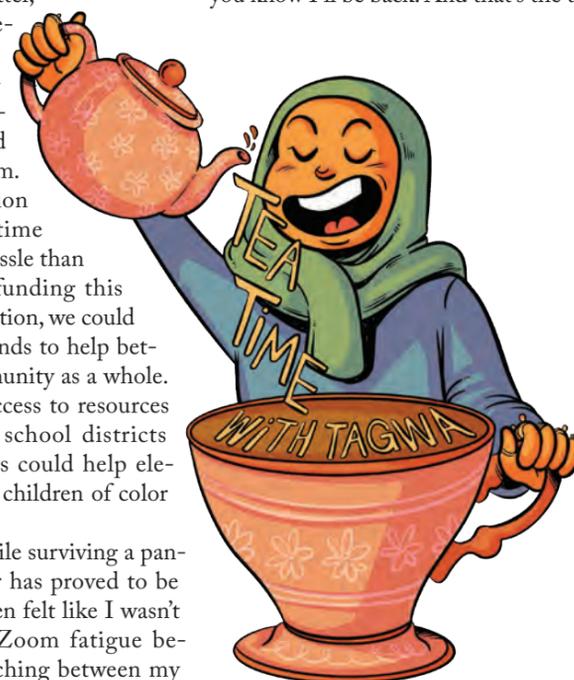


Illustration by Karly Andersen

Cannabis may be legalized, but criminal justice reform is still needed

RACHEL SPILLER
Contributing Writer

The legalization of cannabis is exciting for many Virginians. But how are we to celebrate when there are people who will remain behind bars for the crime?

The issue lies in the history of racism in the U.S. incarceration system, an institution that has been flawed since the launching of the war on drugs in the 1970s.

The legalization of recreational marijuana is officially underway in Virginia, making it the 16th state to take the step forward. In July, marijuana was decriminalized, being reduced from a felony charge to a small fine of \$25 for those in possession of less than an ounce. The movement continued later in that year to legalize the drug altogether; a long-awaited and overdue reform for the commonwealth.

On April 21, Gov. Ralph Northam signed a bill that allows adults 21 and older to legally possess up to an ounce of cannabis and to grow up to four plants per household, starting July 1. Amid the great news of something that contributes to a more socially accepting society, there are many questions to be raised about the new laws in place.

According to an article from Virginia Mercury, those incarcerated on marijuana charges will remain behind bars despite the drug's legalization, which seems far from reasonable.

The history behind the criminalization of marijuana dates back nearly 100 years and can be used to explain why the U.S. currently holds the title as the most incarcerated country worldwide.

In 2018, more than 28,000 people were sentenced to time behind bars for cannabis offenses, according to the Virginia State Police annual crime report. More than half of those arrests were Black Americans, according to the American Civil Liberties Union. This is a tiring trend that we have seen for nearly 50 years since the administration of former President Richard Nixon.

In 1971, Nixon declared a war on drugs, stating the No. 1 enemy to the U.S. was drug abuse. This led to the forming of the Drug Enforcement Administration, which increased the presence of government agents in minority communities and allowed for new methods of criminalization such as no-knock warrants and mandatory sentencing.

Nixon's launch of the war on drugs disproportionately affected minority communities. It has prompted a 500% increase in incarceration rates within the last 40 years with the stricter drug policies in place, while the overall population increased only 51% since 1974, according to Politifact.

Now, with more than 2 million people behind bars, our nation suffers a great tragedy.

Contrary to popular belief, the war on drugs was never about the concern of the



Illustration by Lauren Johnson

American people and drug abuse. It has always been a matter of control in the eyes of those in political power.

Since 1970, the U.S. has felt the repercussions of the needless drug war deeply, seeing our law enforcement discriminate heavily against minorities, watching the unraveling of the American justice system and negatively impacting the lives of millions of people.

Although we are no longer living in the 1970s, the effects of the implementations set by Nixon and former President Ronald Reagan are still visible today. Statistics from the ACLU show that in 2018, more arrests were made for the possession of marijuana than any other drug class. Although white people are just as likely to use and possess marijuana at the same rate as Black Americans, there is a significant difference in the rates of those arrested for petty crime.

America's approach on incarceration has been influenced by harsh sentencing, racial bias and a lack of public safety. There is no reason that one racial group should be affected more than another. In the 21st century, it is hard to believe that this still has to be stated. Our country has seen the impacts of racial disparities for far too long, and it is well past time for them to be addressed and diminished in today's society.

While Virginia has taken a step in the right direction by legalizing cannabis, the next steps in handling those incarcerated for marijuana charges will be the most important in the near future.

The time is now for Virginia to end a racially motivated war on the people. We must move to reform our criminal justice system with the same urgency with which we are reforming drug policy.

PRESS BOX

TRUST THE SCIENCE:

Unvaccinated NBA players should prioritize health, safety



Illustration by Lauren Johnson

YANNI KOUIROUKIDIS
Contributing Writer

TO ME, THE DECISION TO GET MY COVID-19 vaccine was a no brainer. I felt as though this was the best option to keep me and my family safe. I rolled up my sleeve and attended my appointment at the VCU University Student Commons as soon as I became eligible.

Brooklyn Nets guard Kyrie Irving is one of the biggest players in the league to recently avoid giving a concrete stance on his vaccination status, while Washington Wizards shooting guard Bradley Beal attempted to avoid answering questions about his own unvaccinated status.

I received my vaccines, but I'm not going to play over 70 basketball games against the world's best athletes. These players need to get vaccinated not only for their health and safety, but for the betterment of their team.

Besides the health and safety risks staying unvaccinated would cause the players, it would just simply be an inconvenience. For example, if Beal were to not get vaccinated he would have to sit in different sections on both team flights and dinners. Unvaccinated players would also have to use isolated lockers and undergo daily testing during practices and games, according to the NBA's new COVID-19 protocols.

Besides the damage to the team and their own safety, they'll also be hurting their pockets as unvaccinated players are going to be prone to fines and reduced salary.

Since the NBA first suspended its season on March 11, 2020, the league has gone through two seasons and is now in the process to start another season Oct. 19.

Opening night is only two weeks away and yet there is still a feeling of uncertainty around the league surrounding one very big topic — the COVID-19 vaccine.

Beal was originally slated to make the trip to Tokyo for the Olympics this summer to play basketball for Team USA.

However, due to health and safety protocols he was unable to make the trip to compete for a gold medal.

During the Wizards media day on Sept. 27, Beal voiced his concern with how vaccines are being "forced" on players.

"I don't feel pressure [to get vaccinated]," Beal told members of the media. "I don't think you can pressure anybody into doing things, or putting things in their body."

When asked to clarify his comments on the vaccine, Beal questioned breakthrough cases, or cases in which those vaccinated are still getting COVID-19.

"I would ask the question of those who are vaccinated," Beal told the press, "why are you still getting COVID?"

I'm disappointed in Beal's comments, especially due to the fact that he missed the Olympics solely based on his vaccination status. I figured that after losing out on that, he would just accept the fact that the vaccine is needed for both his health and safety. As of right now, Beal is still unvaccinated because of the 60-day waiting period that is needed to get the shot after contracting COVID-19.

Both Beal and Irving have avoided taking a concrete stance on their vaccination status. Leaving a lot of the questions by saying "no comment" or wishing to "keep it private."

Irving is arguably one of the most skilled basketball players to ever play the game. His seven NBA All-Star Game appearances and 2016 NBA championship title speak for themselves.

Even so, one of the game's biggest players has recently found himself surrounded in controversy due to his vaccination beliefs.

Due to COVID-19 protocols, Irving was unable to attend the Sept. 27 media day for the Nets in Brooklyn, according to the Associated Press.

Golden State Warriors forward Andrew Wiggins is another player that has spoken out against getting vaccinated.

Wiggins attempted to file a religious exemption and speak out against the vaccine on several occasions, but his exemption was denied on Sept. 24 by the NBA, according to a press release from the league.

The Warriors announced that Wiggins recently received his vaccination, according to a ESPN report from Monday. Wiggins confirmed he has been fully vaccinated with the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, which will allow him to be fully vaccinated and immune prior to the Warriors' Oct. 21 home opener against the Los Angeles Clippers.

According to local ordinances in both New York City and San Francisco, athletes are required to be vaccinated. If they aren't vaccinated by the start of the season they will be unable to play in all of their home games. And in cases like Irving and Beal, their teams would suffer tremendously without their presence on the court.

Beal is the Wizards' best player and was second in the league last year in points per game, with 31.3, and Irving is a seven-time All-Star and one of the most popular faces in the league.

Although Irving is in Brooklyn with both James Harden and Kevin Durant, fans can look back at last year's playoff loss against the Milwaukee Bucks to see how Irving's absence affected the team, which was due to an ankle injury.

The NBA has stated that they will not mandate players to be vaccinated as a league, according to ESPN. However, if a player is playing for a team that requires vaccination and they aren't vaccinated, they will miss competing in home games without pay, according to NBA spokesperson Mike Bass.

My opinion on this matter is simple — trust the science. I guarantee that these players who are skeptical of receiving the vaccine are not more educated than the scientists behind the COVID-19 vaccines. They do not have the doctorate degrees that the scientists who researched the vaccine do. There's no way that these players did as much research as the scientists who were backed by billions of dollars.

Trust the science, be a reliable teammate, and get the vaccine. These athletes are ultimately hurting their teams in the end if they continue to decide against it.

GAME RESULTS

SEPTEMBER 30

WOMEN'S SOCCER - VS. SAINT LOUIS

WON 1-0

Atlantic 10 Conference

OCTOBER 1

MEN'S CROSS-COUNTRY - AT PAUL SHORT RUN
10TH OF 41

WOMEN'S CROSS-COUNTRY - AT PAUL SHORT RUN
NTS

FIELD HOCKEY - AT MASSACHUSETTS

WON 1-0

Atlantic 10 Conference

VOLLEYBALL - VS. GEORGE MASON

WON 3-1

Atlantic 10 Conference

OCTOBER 2

MEN'S SOCCER - AT LA SALLE

WON 2-1 (2OT)

Atlantic 10 Conference

OCTOBER 3

FIELD HOCKEY - AT PROVIDENCE

WON 1-0

WOMEN'S SOCCER - AT MASSACHUSETTS

WON 2-1 (OT)

Atlantic 10 Conference

WOMEN'S TENNIS

OVERALL 9-15

ITF W60 (Berkeley, CA)

Sept. 27-Oct. 3

VOLLEYBALL - VS. GEORGE MASON

WON 3-0

Atlantic 10 Conference

OCTOBER 4

WOMEN'S TENNIS

OVERALL 7-4

ITA Atlantic Regionals (Lynchburg, VA)

Oct. 1-4

UPCOMING GAMES

OCTOBER 6

MEN'S SOCCER - VS. DUQUESNE

7 p.m.

Atlantic 10 Conference

OCTOBER 7

VOLLEYBALL - AT DAYTON

6 p.m.

Atlantic 10 Conference

OCTOBER 9

MEN'S SOCCER - VS. SAINT LOUIS

7 p.m.

Atlantic 10 Conference

FIELD HOCKEY - VS. DAVIDSON

1 p.m.

Atlantic 10 Conference

VOLLEYBALL - AT DUQUESNE

5 p.m.

Atlantic 10 Conference

CT Opinions

COVID-19 WILL BE THE SCARIEST THING THIS HALLOWEEN SEASON

MONICA ALARCON-NAJARRO
Contributing Writer

In college, Halloween is the one weekend where almost every single college student goes out to some form of party. But this year, the scariest thing at our doorstep won't be a clown costume — it will be COVID-19.

Halloween falls on a weekend this year. That means the spooky holiday will provide an even higher probability for students to go out and potentially expose themselves to COVID-19.

We've come a long way from when the COVID-19 pandemic first escalated in March 2020, but our progress so far does not define our finish line with the virus. The pandemic still isn't over with and not everything is completely safe yet.

As vaccines continue to roll out, I've seen a shield go over the eyes of my peers — blocking themselves from seeing the minimal chance that vaccinated people could still get COVID-19. Not only that, but other illnesses are still going around as we venture into the flu season. No vaccine will ever make anyone invincible to viruses.

Breakthrough cases with COVID-19 can still happen. Similar to any other vaccine, the vaccine for COVID-19 will not fully protect you from the chance of getting sick, but can help in preventing serious hospitalization.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, people with breakthrough infections are less likely to develop severe symptoms, which minimizes their chance at going to the hospital compared to those who are unvaccinated. However, the CDC still states that breakthrough cases, or those who get COVID-19 despite being fully vaccinated, can still spread the virus.

All it takes for someone to get infected at a Halloween party is just one person who has COVID-19. I'm hesitant about my own health when it comes to this upcoming weekend. I'm stuck between wanting to have fun and not wanting to get sick again, as I was sick with a flu earlier this month.

Just because people are getting vaccinated and immunocompromised people are getting booster shots does not mean that the pandemic is gone. The fact that we're still wearing masks in places such as classrooms should be enough to show that COVID-19 can still get passed around among the vaccinated.

According to Johns Hopkins Medicine, in some populations, breakthrough infections have shown infection rates of "approximately 1 in 100 fully vaccinated people." The website also states that the delta variant of COVID-19 is more contagious compared to other COVID-19 variants.

It won't be a surprise to me if VCU has at least one COVID-19 breakthrough

case during or after the Halloween weekend. With tons of students being packed into small spaces for Halloween parties, there's no doubt one of us will get sick with something.

Sure, it does seem like things are going back to normal with businesses opening up and our ability to go to different amusement parks or haunted houses with a mask on, but we shouldn't forget that we're still in a pandemic.

I remember going to Kings Dominion's reopening in May, where they gave vaccinated people the option of wearing a mask

or not, which is a rule they still currently have in place.

I would like to live life normally just like you, but it's taking a lot longer than expected to go back to the old lives we all had. If you do decide to go out this Halloween, please make sure to get tested for COVID-19. Nothing would be worse than unknowingly passing around the flu, let alone COVID-19, to other people.

This year, it may be that COVID-19 can make or break your Halloween. I know that not going out may seem like the worst idea because of fear of missing out, but surrounding yourself with a small group of friends who are not sick may benefit your health in the long run. Life isn't back to normal yet, and you should be aware that the dangers of catching COVID-19 are still out there.



Illustration by Lauren Johnson

ISHAAN NANDWANI
Contributing Writer

I have nine younger cousins, all under the age of 11, and much to the dismay of my aunts and uncles, they have transitioned back and forth between virtual and in-person education over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic here in Virginia, struggling to find any consistency in their learning during this formative period in their lives.

Unfortunately, this has been the case for many similar families across the commonwealth. As Virginian families struggle to readjust, they seek elected officials who can help ease their children's transition into in-person education during the pandemic.

Currently, with the transition back to in-person schooling, we're seeing a whole new host of regulations emerge, including mandatory vaccinations and mask mandates, many of which are under major contention during the Virginia gubernatorial race.

Beyond the stricter COVID-19 regulations accompanying the shift back to in-person education, we're also seeing the curriculum in Virginia schools shift to focus on race and gender, as evidenced by the anti-racism policy at Fairfax County Public Schools and the new policies supporting inclusivity for transgender students by the Virginia Department of Education.

This change has been incited by the recent racial and social justice reckoning in our nation — including the protests against police brutality for the death of George Floyd in May 2020 — but not without backlash.

Glenn Youngkin, the Republican candidate in the Virginia gubernatorial race, and his supporters have repeatedly fought



Illustration by Lauren Johnson

Schools in Virginia are evolving, and that's a good thing

against COVID-19 precautions in schools and the new direction our schools are heading with their curriculums, arguing that Democrats are interfering with our education system.

This point of view could not be more flawed.

First of all, the pandemic is still not over. It might feel exhausting to keep hearing this, but it's true. So long as case rates are still up and the lives of our community members are threatened, we must continue to wear our masks — the minor inconvenience is a small price to pay to protect those most vulnerable around us.

As of Oct. 26, there have been nearly 920,000 active cases of COVID-19 in Virginia, and this number is still rising, according to the Virginia Department of Health.

As for vaccines, I'm shocked that we're still seeing a resistance to them. Science has repeatedly proven that the COVID-19 vaccine is safe, and it has already saved countless lives. Living in the U.S., we're privileged enough that any one of us can walk into a local clinic or Rite Aid and get our shot for free, which is simply not possible in lesser developed countries.

Making vaccines mandatory is a necessary step for schools to take. At school, students are constantly in close proximity with their peers and teachers, any of whom could have preexisting conditions or be immunocompromised. Unvaccinated students pose a direct threat to these students and faculty members, and schools should be at liberty to make the decision to protect their students.

At VCU, we've already made that step to require vaccinations for students, barring case-by-case exemptions. According to the VCU vaccination dashboard, 95.1% of students and 97.1% of employees have been vaccinated, as of Oct. 25. The vaccine mandate at VCU has been extremely effective in ensuring that our campus builds its immunity against the virus.

Finally, the curriculum in Virginia schools should reflect our changing values. Historically, our curriculum has been built upon the white man's narrative. When I was in elementary school, I read literature written by white authors, celebrated "heroes" like Christopher Columbus and learned the history of our country from an extremely one-sided perspective. I'll let you guess which side that was.

I seldom had conversations about race or gender, or saw people of color like myself represented in our education system.

But today, I see greater hope for our schools. Each day, as my cousin — now in the fifth grade — comes home from school. She's learning not only about race, but to be an advocate, to be anti-racist and not silent in the plight of the oppressed. And that's a blessing in and of itself to see.

When we see direct attacks on education rooted in making our world more equitable, we must question whether those in opposition truly are acting in the best interest of all of our children.

Education in our state may be extremely divided in this day and age, but the one thing that all parents have in common is wanting the best for their kids. Prioritizing children's safety, and not shying away from uncomfortable conversations, is the only way we do that and continue to grow.