

# Time to weed the garden (or the dispensable Marty Harbin)

Fayette News - May 18, 2018 - Opinion

If you want to meet someone who is truly making a difference in our world, you should introduce yourself to Jennifer Conforti. She is the founder and executive director of Two Sparrows Village, a project still in its infancy, but one that holds much promise and even more heart. As envisioned, Two Sparrows Village will provide adults with intellectual disabilities with a specialized community of their own in which to live amongst their peers, to participate in educational programs geared towards their needs, and to help integrate them as productive, valuable members of the wider populace. Independence, inclusiveness, and personal potential are goals that the non-profit organization hopes to achieve for those very loved, but disadvantaged members of our own families and neighborhoods. Fayetteville is slated to be home to one of, if not the first, of these remarkable communities.

You may wonder how Conforti came to find herself on this life path. About four years ago, her daughter, Abby, was diagnosed with a serious brain abnormality known as Partial Agenesis of the Corpus Collosum in which the bundle of neurotransmitters between the two hemispheres of the brain fail to completely develop. Abby is missing about two-thirds of the normal amount. This has resulted in serious autistic behavior, and Abby, who is now 7, still does not talk and needs to wear diapers. She can be aggressive and self-injurious. When she was about 3 years old, she began biting her right arm to the point of rendering it bloody and bruised. It became so bad that her parents were forced to wrap and tape her arm in thick bindings so she couldn't get to it. That would result in her biting her other arm, her legs, whatever she could get to, and failing that, she'd try to bite her parents or even the dog.

There is a theory that, similar to "cutting," this biting is an attempt to feel something besides the frustration of not being able to communicate with others, through speech or other means. The fits became so bad that Jennifer and her husband would spend hours of every day physically restraining Abby so that she couldn't continue to harm herself. They'd often each take 45-minute shifts, trading off when the other would give out. Eventually, due to exhaustion, they'd have to let her go and she would resume the blood-drawing gnawing on her arm.

Various doctors, medicines, therapies, and massage techniques were all employed to try to find some sort of alleviation for Abby and her parents. Nothing was working. Their lives were in shambles. Exhausted, stressed, and disheartened, Jennifer nevertheless wasn't going to give up on Abby. After months of bleary-eyed investigation, she happened to come across a blog posting in which a woman described how her severely autistic adult child had been helped through the use of medical cannabis.

This small glimmer of hope sent Conforti on a quest that eventually put her in contact with an expert in Texas, who told her that she was in a "triage" situation and that she needed to go buy an ounce of "street weed" and make sure it was "loud" (meaning super strong). She did as the man advised and acquired some. Knowing that she was violating all kinds of laws, she hesitated before giving it to Abby.

"I had it in the house for two weeks before I had the guts to give it to her. I'm an 80's girl. A just-say-no Nancy Reagan girl," Jennifer says.

In just four days, Abby was off her pharmaceuticals, the daily self-harming had ceased, and the Confortis haven't had to restrain their daughter in nearly four years. They suddenly had their lives back. All due to the miraculous properties of a little plant.

Abby hasn't "lost" her autism. Her brain is still neurologically malformed. She's still got the callus on her arm from all the biting. She still bites occasionally when she gets frustrated. But now it's not for hours, it's for minutes or seconds. She can calm herself now, something impossible before. She's happy and can function. And she, as she always had been, is loved.

This was when Jennifer Conforti became the activist she is today. At the time, Georgia didn't allow for medical cannabis. A longtime Republican, the issue drove her more and more into the Libertarian camp.

"I hate that these men and women voted into power can choose what I can or can't give to my child," she says.

In 2016, she traveled to the state capital building in Atlanta to meet with Allan Peake, a legislator from Macon who was in the forefront of getting the medical cannabis laws changed. Inspired by her story, Peake convinced Conforti to testify before a House Committee hearing, even going so far as to secure the promise from the head of the Georgia Division of Family and Children Services that he would not pursue any related matter in regard to the Confortis.

In 2017, autism was finally recognized in Georgia as a legitimate condition that could be treated legally with cannabis, but the problem now was that even though it was legal to possess, there was still no safe way to acquire it. The production and sale of it were still outlawed.

After Jennifer's testimony in 2016, she met a massive network of parents in situations similar to hers, and they all suggested that she needed to speak with her State Senator, in order to make the first steps in getting the accessibility laws changed.

So she made an appointment to meet with State Senator Marty Harbin. She was not impressed.

"You know how you get these impressions of someone initially? You don't want to believe them because you just met this person, you know? He's lived up to my initial impressions." She describes being made to feel as if she were wasting the Senator's time with her trivial, unimportant matter. Harbin had a look on his face that said "I really don't have time for you, but I gotta do this," says Conforti. He gave her the usual runaround about pot being a gateway drug and other non-pertinent pronouncements. She came away from the meeting feeling that Harbin was a "haughty, self-serving, condescending, doesn't-have-time-for-his-little-people state senator."

What really disturbed her about the meeting was one particular thing that Harbin said. He indicated that he was glad the cannabis oil was helping her daughter and that if he had a child that needed it, he'd break the law himself as well. Conforti was stunned and could only scream out in her head "Why would you break the law when you have the ability to change the law?!" Apparently, the senator is only willing to change a law that affects him personally. The very definition of self-serving.

Harbin continues to vote against medical cannabis.

Fast forward to May of 2017. Marty Harbin is pulled over by the Tyrone Police for driving his truck on expired tags. The officer informs him that the vehicle will have to be impounded by Georgia law. The Senator then goes on a tirade about how he's a senator and he'll call the mayor on this poor policeman and he's going to the Senate and this law is going to be changed. And then he did just that. Got the law passed in the Legislature. Governor Deal vetoed it, so Marty still has to get his tags renewed like the rest of us.

Jennifer Conforti's favorite quote is sometimes attributed to Thomas Jefferson: "If a law is unjust, a man is not only right to disobey it, he is obligated to do so."

I guess Harbin feels much the same way. The senator feels there is too much regulation, especially on our Ford F150's. I'll wager Jennifer Conforti could show him what too much regulation REALLY looks like. I'll bet he doesn't want to see.

**Christopher Fairchild is the editor of Panacea magazine and Welcome to Fayette magazine, and works as a photographer and graphic designer for Fayette Newspapers.**