

# community profile

Just about a year ago, a legislature that looked very different from the one sitting today passed a strict medical marijuana bill, Act 135. One of the people who helped make that happen and hopes to change the status of marijuana still more is Nancy Lynch, the Vermont Marijuana Policy Project's statewide organizer.

Marijuana is not the only policy project she's into. Lynch began working in women's health and had a job in D.C. But she was looking for a job outside the Beltway where she could use her activist and organizing skills working on a citizen's rights issue. The Marijuana Policy Project job in Vermont was the perfect fit.

"I call myself a citizen's rights activist," Lynch insisted. "I believe that people have a right to choose how to live their lives without the government stepping in. To choose whether to have a baby or not and to choose what medicine works for them."

Some Vermonters have suggested that her phone might be tapped or that she might be under increased surveillance because of her pro-marijuana work, but she has not seen anything to confirm that supposition. "If they're there, they're really good," she said. "And I have a great relationship with the people over at the Department of Safety, which runs the [medical marijuana] registry."

Lynch, 43, is the youngest of four kids who grew up in several towns around the South Shore of Massachusetts. She connects with Brockton, though she also "lived on the Cape, in Hyannis, just down the street from the Kennedy compound." Her family was Catholic, and when her parents divorced, they were ex-communicated from the church, Lynch says.

"I was pushing the envelope from the time I could talk. I was the only one in my family who finished high school, and the only one who went to college," she adds proudly. "I always wanted to follow my own path. My mom said, 'Always, always, always fight for the underdog.' Being a lesbian, you learn to stand up for other outsiders."

She spent the "obligatory summer in California" after high school and went to college for a year before deciding it wasn't for her. She got married and had a child, then divorced her husband. While Adam was young, she worked in corporate sales: "As a single mom, I had to go where the money was."

Ten years ago she found Goddard



## Nancy Lynch Community Activist

**It's her job to sell the concept of taxing and regulating marijuana to voters. She'll speak to Chambers of Commerce, Rotary, even PTOs: "if they'll let me come and talk to them!"**

— and that was just the first thing about Vermont that was a perfect fit. "A friend told me about Goddard, and it was just so perfect for me. I don't like rules and needed a lot of space." And she needed to complete her degree while working full time.

But as soon as she could, she decided to work on birth issues — motivated in large part by the difficult experience she had with her own childbirth. "I had lots of interventions and ended up having a C-section. That was really the first time I began to question the routine practices of the childbirth industry." At Goddard she earned her degree in Health Arts &

Sciences, specializing in maternal health, "especially the anthropology of it." She studied childbirth customs and practices from past and present in many cultures. "I really want to protect the sacredness of childbirth, to honor it as a rite of passage."

Lynch is now a certified childbirth educator and incorporates natural modalities into her practice and teaching. She is also a professional Dula, or labor coach — someone who provides personal support to a laboring mother-to-be when no one else is available.

In her "spare" time, she's the recently elected president of the Central

Vermont League of Women Voters. And she does have a little spare time — when she's not working on the new marijuana bill — now that her son is 21 and on his own. She admits, however, that time with her partner of four years, Gia Biden, can be scarce. Biden works at Kimbell Sherman Ellis, a public relations firm that worked on civil unions.

The new bill, H.390, would put marijuana in the same category as tobacco and alcohol — in essence, legalizing the drug. Lynch calls it "The Tax and Regulate Bill." It's her job to sell the concept to voters — she'll speak to Chambers of Commerce, Rotary, even PTOs "if they'll let me come and talk to them" — and to get them to contact legislators with their support for the proposal.

"A lot of patients felt left out" of Act 135, the medical marijuana bill, which restricts legal use to patients with cancer, AIDS, or multiple sclerosis, Lynch begins. "Marijuana prohibition is not working. In 2003, 99 individuals spent time in Vermont prisons for possession of marijuana. 255 marijuana-related charges were brought in 2003, and 171 of those were for possession. Teenagers' use has not gone down — it's as easy to get now as it was 30 years ago."

The Tax and Regulate bill, she maintains, "takes a public health approach," and "is better than simple decriminalization." Part of the plan is dedicating half the revenue "raised by the licensure of marijuana wholesalers and retailers and marijuana taxes to the prevention and treatment of drug, alcohol, and tobacco use," according to the bill's short form.

Asked about the "gateway drug" characterization of marijuana, Lynch answered, "The gateway is not the drug, but the dealer. How easy is it for a dealer to say, 'Hey, I don't have any weed right now, how about this other thing?' And dealers don't card. There's a lot of good reasons that Tax and Regulate is sound public policy."

And there's Nancy Lynch, continuing to "push the envelope" in her role as a citizen activist. ▼

*More information on H.390 can be found on the Vermont Marijuana Policy Project website, [www.vmpp.org](http://www.vmpp.org) or by phone at 802-223-0800.*