



KENOSHA NEWS PHOTOS BY BRIAN PASSINO

Reuther High School Bridges teacher Frank Falduto, left, accompanies soap company spokesman Ralph Bronner on Bronner's unofficial Wisconsin state song while, from Bronner's left, Kevin Martin, of Community Impact Programs, Bridges Liaison Tricia Collins, and students Wynette Day and Delise Evans listen during Bronner's Tuesday visit to Reuther.

Songs from a helpful heart

Be yourself and be involved, guest tells Reuther class

By Chris Barncard

Kenosha News

It's not just anyone who will stand up in front of a classroom full of jaded high school kids, strap on an acoustic guitar and ask the stone faces to sing along to an improvised tune about llamas, turtles and hippos.

But there is a kernel of that idea — believe in yourself and you can get anything done — in Ralph Bronner's messages.

"I was shy when I was young," Bronner, a Menomonee Falls man whose family runs a well-known organic soap company in California, told about 20 students from Reuther High School's Bridges program for at-risk students Tuesday while trying to cajole them into singing. "I couldn't do stuff like this. I know, at your age everything sucks."

Bronner, who showed up at Reuther in a decidedly dressed-down hooded sweatshirt and jeans, remembers that things can be a bummer for kids. His father, Emmanuel Bronner, left Germany in 1929 for Wisconsin, but ended up receiving shock treatments in an asylum after a heated verbal dust-up with a University of Chicago dean led to his arrest.

Emmanuel Bronner escaped the asylum with little more than the shirt on his back, but eventually started a soap company in California that became Dr. Bronner's Magic Soap, with about \$9 million in annual sales.

His children and grandchildren now run the company, but there were lean years in between for Ralph Bronner — including 15



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Ralph Bronner
Dr. Bronner's Magic Soaps

different homes.

"I've woken up on a chicken farm in Indiana and in an orphanage full of rats in Chicago," he said. "But I didn't know it was supposed to ruin my life."

His message to the Reuther students — interspersed with story upon story ranging from goofball to heart-rending — was clear.

"Stick to your dream and don't let any one nail you down," he said.

It came across loud and clear to 16-year-old Reuther sophomore Wynette Day.

"He just wants us to be ourselves and do what we think is best for the world," she

said.

The Reuther Bridges teachers were impressed with the way Bronner connected with their students.

"These kids really walk to the beat of a different drummer, and he appreciates that," teacher Pat Thompson said.

"He's a little crazy," said Frank Falduto, the teacher who invited Bronner to speak to his class. "Well, I wouldn't say crazy — just really eccentric."

Bronner's company disperses over 20 percent of its profits to charitable organizations, but Ralph Bronner's stories of helping dig wells in Africa or feed the homeless in Milwaukee champion the merit of personal involvement over financial contributions.

"This only happens when you get involved in a charity," Bronner said of improving the lot of fellow human beings. "It doesn't happen when you just send a check."

The stories include people whose lives were devastated by civil war, disease or plain old rotten luck, all making the best of their lives despite being far worse off than the kids in Falduto's classroom.

"Our problems are silly," said Kelvin Martin, who works with kids like those in Bridges through Community Impact Programs. "They're nothing compared to all these people he knows. We're complaining and they're all right."

Bronner urged the Bridges students — whose course requirements include volunteer work in the community — to involve themselves in the well being of all people.

"How many of you have mothers who would fall over if you said, 'Mom, take it easy. I'll do the dishes'?" he said. "You don't have to wait. You can do it tonight. You can do it tomorrow."

Dad's vision; son's calling

Ralph Bronner not only promotes soap, he crusades to make the world better.

When he visited Kenosha Tuesday, Bronner treated me to the convoluted digressions that advance his causes.

"I say there should be a constitutional amendment that every child in America has the right to a loving, caring person in their life who values an education," he told me.

Bronner, 67, taught 32 years in an inner-city Milwaukee public school before he retired from teaching.

He talks about folks he knows personally – a woman who adopts hard-to-place kids, a doctor who travels the world to heal kids' bodies and spirits, a woman who freely gives her time despite being in a wheelchair.

"See, these are the saints of the earth – and you never hear about them," says Bronner, who lives in Menomonee Falls.

HE TALKS ALMOST nonstop, pausing to say unselfconsciously, "interrupt me anytime because I was born talking."

Not coincidentally, he's spokesman for Dr. Bronner's Magic Soaps, a \$6.5 million company he and his late brother inherited from their father. In 2003, they sold 10 million dollars of soap.

Ralph, the VP, now co-owns it with his

sister-in-law, Trudy, and her two sons.

"We believe in constructive capitalism – sharing the profit with the workers and the earth from which we made it," Bronner says.

The philosophy, inherited from his father, netted the company's 22 employees annual bonuses the past two years of \$15,000 to \$60,000 each. All full time vested employees earn annual salaries above \$42,000. No one earns annual salaries below \$42,000, and the company pays health insurance, including deductibles. Workers fork out only \$10 co-pays per prescription and doctor visits.

The earth-friendly company encourages people to "commit random kindness and senseless acts of beauty," a slogan printed on bumper stickers Bronner gives out with free soap products. Over 25 percent of the company profits fund charities. (It was 50% in 2003!)

Bronner says he never knew he was supposed to feel disadvantaged, even though he shuffled between 15 foster homes as a child.

His father, Emanuel Bronner, a fourth-generation soap-maker who emigrated from Europe in 1929, landed in an Illinois insane asylum in 1947 but later escaped, fleeing to California with little more than the shirt on his back.

THE ELDER BRONNER eventually founded the company in the mid-1950s in Los Angeles. He died in 1997 and left it to his sons. By then, annual sales were \$6 million.

Health food store customers know the labels featuring his "Moral ABC of All-One-God-Faith" laid out in stream-of-consciousness non sequiturs.

The soap gained popularity in the 60s and early '70s among folks returning to nature and going back to the Godhead.

People rediscovered the unusually pure soaps in the 1990s, and sales jumped 20 percent in 2002.

Before realizing the true legacy left to him, Bronner admits thinking dad really "was nuts."

"I now have nothing but respect for a man who went blind but devoted his whole life to making the world a better place," Bronner says. "I grew to love the sort of man who loved God more than making money.

"I've become my father."

AT ITS ESSENCE, the Moral ABC All-One-God-Faith is simple: We're all united under one God, by whatever name we call that God.

For the unabridged version, buy the soaps, or join Ralph for his "168th birthday*" June 6 at Wellspring in Newburg.

Call him at (262) 255-5511 for details. He won't mind talking.

Bill Guida's column runs four days a week. E-mail him at bguida@kenoshanews.com

* Dr. Bronner added ten years in his later life to "look healthier." In dad's memory Ralph added 100!

Since, 1991, when I left teaching inner-city 7th & 8th grade to help run Dr. Bronner's Magic Soaps, with others in the Bronner family, my life has been a joy. I have always loved "folk music" and people and I never tire of telling the story of my father and the business. I love playing songs for 3 to 8 year olds, special needs people and in homes for the aged. There is a real joy in music..... and in telling about the wonderful people and causes we help. My van always has a guitar, soap and articles.

This was the second time I talked and sang for "at-risk" high school students and again I was touched by the results.

Both of these articles appeared on separate days in the KENOSHA NEWS (a city of about 35,000 near Milwaukee, where I live) March 31st and April 1st 2004. I thought they did a great job of capturing what I do and what I love.

Love in All-one!

