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Soap for Spaceship Earth

Fall man adopts father's business, philosophies

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Staff Writer

Old hippies to New Agers, know the cleansing value - for body and soul - of Dr. Bronner's Magic Soaps.

And while the organic soap company, famed among people who patronize natural-food stores, is headquartered in southern California, its current guru and spokesman lives modestly on Shady Lane in Menomonee Falls.

One of the first things he feels like doing upon returning home from visiting his family's soap manufacturing plant in Escondido, Calif., near San Diego, is hug a tree.

"We love the naturalness of Wisconsin," Bronner said.

Bronner, 68, and his wife, Gisela, have called Menomonee Falls home for 28 years.

"It's 20 minutes from downtown Milwaukee and 20 minutes from 15 lakes," Bronner says of his adopted community. Dr. Bronner's "All-One" philosophy, a theory of religion focusing on peace, unity and nature, is even apparent on his van.

Bronner frequently packs the van with cases of Dr. Bronner's soap and gives it away while he tours the country on "soap trips."

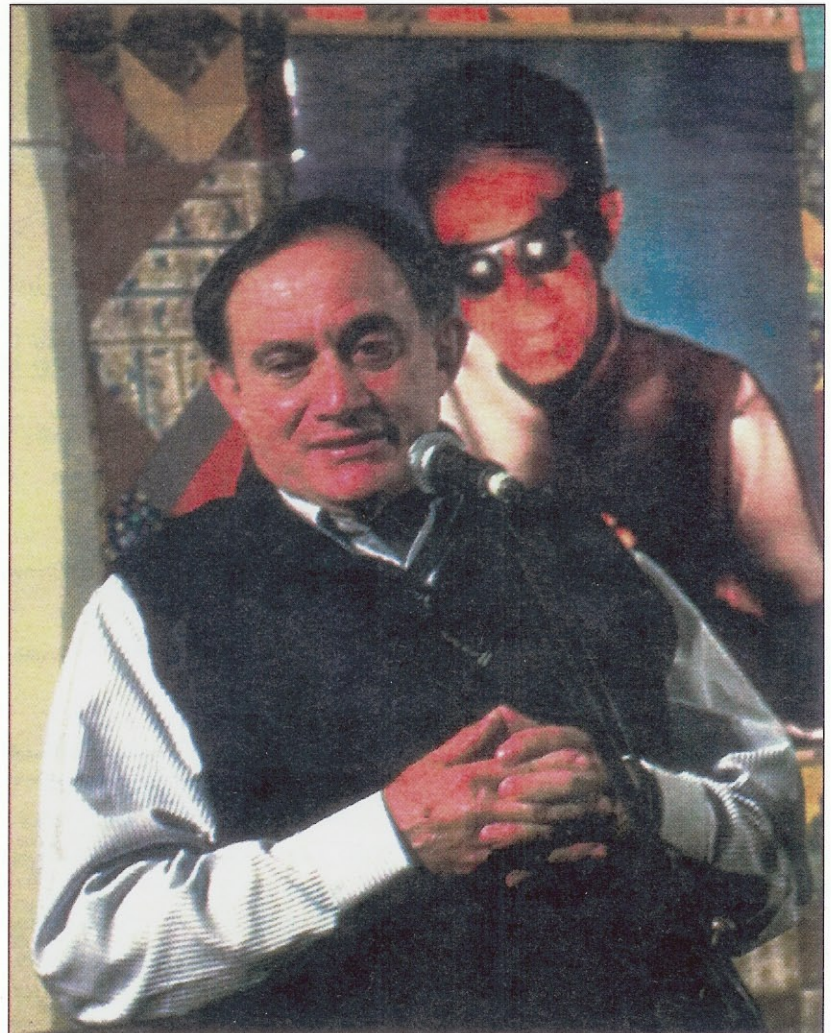
While some people may not recognize Bronner's name, they might be familiar with the over 40,000 bumper sticker he distributes that says, "Commit Random Kindness & Senseless Acts of

Beauty."

Father led the way

Besides serving as the top pitchman for Dr. Bronner's Magic Soaps, Bronner says his other main purpose is to keep his father's memory and crusade alive.

Bronner never tires of telling the story of the soap company founded in the 1950's by his father Emanuel Bronner, whose castile soaps and mes-



COMMUNITY NEWSPAPERS PHOTO BY NATHAN PIER

Ralph Bronner of Menomonee Falls speaks to an audience at the Coffee House in Milwaukee. Bronner is vice president and spokesman for Dr. Bronner's Magic Soaps. Behind Bronner is the image of his late father, the real "Dr. Bronner". Ralph loves music and has been helping the Coffee House for over 25 years.

sage of peace resonated with the counterculture of the '60's and '70's. Today, outdoor-lovers and health-conscious consumers who surf the Internet, join those in alternate lifestyles as fans of Dr. Bronner's Magic Soaps.

The company tops \$10 million in annual sales despite very little advertising and no salesmen..

The soap is as known for its all-natural ingredients as it is for the "All-One-God-Faith" arcane philosophy printed on

its labels, laid out in stream-of-consciousness nonsequiturs.

It is Dr. Bronner's "Moral ABC's," containing a bit of Zen and a lot of moralizing.

"We are all brothers and sisters and we should take care of each other and Spaceship Earth" is a fundamental message.

Ralph's father was an eccentric scientist and fourth-generation master German soapmaker from an Orthodox-Jewish family, who rebelled against his tyrannical father by immigrating to America in 1929.

The family name was Heilbronner, but the soapmaker dropped the prefix "Heil" because of its association with Adolf Hitler. The soapmaker's parents were killed in the Holocaust.

Emanuel Bronner initially worked as a consultant to soap companies in the United States before deciding to go into business for himself after mainstream soap companies converted to synthetic formulations.

Ralph Bronner did not have an easy childhood. As the son of the soapmaker, he was shuffled between 15 foster homes.

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

Ralph and his brother Jim became active in the family business about 20 years ago when his father, who became blind, needed his assistance.

Most of Ralph's professional life - 32 years - had been spent teaching reading and language at an inner-city Milwaukee public school. Jim was a brilliant chemist and had two patents for snowfoam and a fire fighting material. He also "straightened out" the business and brought wonderful benefits for the workers.

Emanuel Bronner died in 1997 at age 89. Ralph Bronner's only sibling, Jim Bronner died the following year.

Ralph Bronner views Dr. Bronner's Magic Soaps as a model of social responsibility and earth stewardship.

Recently, the firm was given the first Green Business Leader Award by Co-op

America's Business Network for being "a business leader who has led the way in creating a just and sustainable society and whose efforts are at the forefront of the green business movement."

Shares Profits with Staff

The company also practices "constructive capitalism," in which profits are shared with the workers.

Total compensation of company executives is capped at five times that of the lowest paid position.

Employees annually receive 15 percent of their salary paid into a retirement/profit-sharing plan, and up to 25 percent of their salary paid as a bonus.

In 2004, bonuses ranged from \$15,000 to \$60,000 for each of Dr. Bronner's 22 employees; the 3rd year in a row!

The company also pays virtually all health insurance costs, including deductibles, for its workers.

"Corporate America wants us to believe that you can't make money by sharing profits with workers," Bronner said. "We are proving them wrong and loving it."

More than 25 percent of the company's profits are donated to "human projects" all over Spaceship Earth - from aiding homeless shelters in America and orphanages in China to digging fresh water wells in Ghana, planting trees and assisting organic farms.

Among the company's largest donations was a gift of roughly 1,200 acres to the Boys and Girls Club in San Diego to create a camp.

Over the last five years, charitable gifting to social and environmental causes has roughly matched the company's total after-tax income.

"As a company we're about as holistic as you can be," Bronner said. "We're good for the earth, share with our workers and still make a profit."

Some 4 million bottles and bars of Dr. Bronner's Magic Soaps are made each year. The soaps are made with olive, hemp and palm oils, resulting in a

mild, smooth, creamy lathering.

The soaps can be used for everyday washing, dishwashing, laundry - even to clean teeth. Dr. Bronner's soap varieties include peppermint, rose, lemon, almond, eucalyptus and lavender.

Day-to-day company operations are handled by Ralph's sister-in-law and two nephews. Bronner's three sons are not in the business.

Dr. Bronner's Magic Soaps is moving into the mainstream: it is on the shelves of retail chains including Pick 'n Save. The Bronners cannot stop this move to corporate stores, but still love the "Mom & Pop" Stores that helped them get started.

And in just the past year, the company has entered the Japanese market, drawing so many orders that it represents one-tenth of Dr. Bronner's business.

But it is the giving, as much as the revenue, that interests Ralph and his family.

He quotes Paul Newman: "If people knew the joy of giving, they wouldn't wait 'till they die to do it."

CLEANSING THOUGHTS

Slogans from Dr. Bronner's soap bottles:

- Flee from the crowd and dwell with truthfulness.
- To hoard brings hate, to climb brings dizziness.
- The crowd has envy and success blinds all.
- There are brave souls who dare to dream that men are brothers and not foes.
- Let the dead Past bury its dead.
- Learn to labor and learn to write 'till we rally, raise, unite!
- We are all bothers and sisters because of one, eternal, ever-loving Father!

Dr. Bronner's Magic Soaps

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