

# LOVE, SONGS, KIDS, AND DR. BRONNER'S MAGIC SOAPS IN HARLEM!

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## SOAP STAR FINDS SPARKLE IN HARLEM SCHOOL

*Teacher asked and Bronner showed up with gifts and guitar*

All Tom Goodridge had to do was ask.

Now, it seems, the New York City retired special education teacher and those young students passing through PS 76 in Harlem have a friend for life from Waukesha County — plus a supply of excellent soap — in the unconventional person of Ralph Bronner of Menomonee Falls.

“It’s an incredible story of love of the people who need it the most, in the inner city,” Bronner explained during a recent interview.

The connection is not so hard to understand if you know Bronner’s story and his link to those “magic soaps” and the messages on their bottles.

For the unacquainted: Bronner 70, is the sole surviving child of Emmanuel Bronner, inventor of Dr. Bronner’s Peppermint 18-in-1 Pure-Castile Soap that first took hold in the 1960s

culture of hippies and health food stores.

The business with a social conscience is still around and growing. It’s run by the Bronner family in Escondido, Calif., and its soap products still carry the unmistakable labels crammed full of the Bronner philosophy about peace, love and all-for-one, one-for-all unity on Spaceship Earth.

In any given year, as much as 40% to 60% of the company’s profits, according to Ralph Bronner, are donated to favorite charitable causes.

They range from establishment of wells in Ghana and orphanages in China to an eco-sensitive gardening and wellness center in Newburg, here in Ozaukee County.

Ralph Bronner, a 32-year public school teacher in Milwaukee’s central city before retiring in 1991, used to hate working on those seemingly confusing messages crafted by his father —



**Ralph Bronner** of the Dr. Bronner's Magic Soaps family has been bringing soap and song regularly into the lives of Harlem students since 2002.

sometimes thousands of words long.

He was frustrated the two weeks a year he’d spend at the business run out of his father’s bedroom in California.

“Eccentric geniuses are impossible to live with,” said Bronner, whose mother died when he was very young and is gone from his memory.

By the time his father died in 1997, “Dr.

Bronner” was long blind — from electroshock treatments he received while institutionalized for insanity, family members contend — and had Parkinson’s disease, barely able to hold the business together.

Ralph Bronner and his brother, who died a year later, salvaged Dr. Bronner’s Magic Soaps.

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 brothers and sisters because of one, eternal, ever-loving Father!

### Dr. Bronner's Magic Soaps

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