

The Magic Man

Ralph Bronner continues his father's legacy of keeping America clean — naturally.

Story by Laurie Arendt · Photography by Thomas MacDonald

On a quiet, shady street in Menomonee Falls, Ralph Bronner stands in the basement of his middle-class home and answers the phone with a simple, yet powerful greeting. "All-one" he says. "Ralph speaking."

With those words, Ralph Bronner spreads a message that has graced millions of Dr. Bronner's Magic Soap bottles, an off-off Broadway stage and helped raise money for a variety of charitable causes, many of which have flown under the radar of more corporate philanthropic efforts.

"Every day is different," Ralph says as he packages up a donated case of soap in his kitchen. It's headed off to the East Coast, along with a quickly written note from Bronner. "I never know what's going to happen when I pick up the phone."

And with that, Ralph begins to tell the magical story behind the soap, which started with his father Dr. Emmanuel Bronner, a third generation soap maker from Heilbronn, Germany.

Dr. Bronner immigrated to the United States in

concentration camps.

"My father never went to a university," he says. "But he really did have the equivalent of a doctorate. He didn't believe in higher education — he believed in thinking out of the box and working with your hands."

After settling in Milwaukee, Dr. Bronner met and married his wife, who was working as a maid at the Schroeder Hotel. They had two sons and a daughter before she died in 1943. Ralph has no memory of her.

"My dad couldn't take care of us so he sent us to live in foster care," says Ralph, who lived in 15 different foster homes before finding some stabil-

father, who by then had started making soap in Los Angeles, CA. Ralph graduated from Rufus King High School, attended UW-Milwaukee (where he met his German-born wife, Gisela, and the two eloped) and received an education degree.

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1929, leaving behind an ultra-conservative family and experiences of anti-Semitism. "When my father was four years old, he was chased home by bullies who trapped him in an alley," says Bronner, who explained that the bullies threw a bucket of urine on him and hurled an anti-Semitic insult. "At his age, he didn't understand why. Worse yet, he had to go home and asked my grandparents what 'goddamned kike' meant."

Ralph's grandparents died in the World War II

ity with Jack and Mary Galli. "Eccentric geniuses do not make good fathers."

In the meantime, Dr. Bronner's intensity and radicalism got him in trouble. "He was ultimately sent to an insane asylum," says Ralph. "He escaped and fled as far away as he could, which was California."

Back in Milwaukee, Ralph and his siblings lived a relatively happy and stable life with the Galli family. The Bronner children rarely saw their



Ralph Bronner and Jamie Venci look over some of the latest products at Outpost Foods. Bronner's father, Dr. Emmanuel Bronner, started the natural soap business decades ago.

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the relationship deteriorated to the point where father and son did not even speak, they eventually reconciled.

The easiest way to get a glimpse of what Dr. Bronner was like is to read a label of any Dr. Bronner's Magic Soap. Each label contains his "Moral ABC," a philosophy for life condensed into more than 3,000 words per quart label.

"I typed his labels, and told him that he had too many words, that nobody would read them," remembers Ralph. "He said, 'Those are the words of God, you decide what should be cut!'"

The words stayed, though Dr. Bronner continually revised them, making his son retype the entire label. The two also disagreed on other aspects of the business. "I told him to rename the peppermint soap 'Mint glow,'" says Ralph. "Which, of course, he never did."

It's hard to distill the message of Dr. Bronner, who spent his life trying to reunite "Spaceship Earth." "Dad thought we were all children of the same God, the All-One concept," says Ralph. "All one or none!"

Dr. Bronner felt for the common man. One of his (and Ralph's) favorite quotes is from Abraham Lincoln, and is found on the label of Dr. Bronner's Magic Soaps 18-in-1 Hemp Tea Tree Pure-Castile Soap: "God must've loved the common people of the Earth — he made so many of them."

As Dr. Bronner grew older, he suffered from blindness and Parkinson's Disease, before disembarking "Spaceship Earth" in 1997. Much of his philosophy was tape recorded. "After Dad went blind, he couldn't read books, so I would sit and read to him," says Ralph. "He took what he liked, adapted it in some cases and put it on the labels. It wasn't so much a religion, but a cosmic soup. He always said, 'Jew or Gentile, everyone needs soap. But the message is what is important.'"

Dr. Bronner's Magic Soaps are available in liquid and bar form in peppermint, almond, eucalyptus, aloe vera, lavender and tea tree. Enough tapes remain to do another label should the company develop another soap.

During the last few years of Dr. Bronner's life, family members

stepped in and began taking control of the company. Ralph now serves as vice president and official spokesperson for the company. Though the company is still based in California, Ralph refuses to do more than visit when needed.

"I live in a place where I can be 20 minutes from downtown and, in the other direction, 20 minutes from 15 lakes," he says. "If we have a traffic jam, it makes the news. That's why I stay here. I love Wisconsin."

Much has remained the same since Dr. Bronner's death. The company has never advertised and has no plans to do so. Even so, it continues to receive positive press in major publications and unsolicited endorsements from common people to celebrities, including make-up artist Bobbi Brown and Martha Stewart.

The company has received thousands of letters of support, ranging from a man who read the label and found his purpose in life to someone else who simply likes the soap because after taking a shower, "it feels like I have a York Peppermint Patty in my shorts."

The corporate culture is unique — every employee receives a profit sharing bonus anywhere from \$10,000 to \$40,000 each year and 26 percent of its profits are donated to charity. The \$8 million a year company packs about three million soap bottles per year by hand, most of which are sold in health food stores. "Corporate America wants us to believe that you have to have machinery and pollution if you want products; that we can't make money if we share profits with workers," he says. "We are proving them wrong and loving it."

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Ralph Bronner

Ralph is no fan of corporate America. "They've come to us and told us how much they agree with what Dad had to say," he says. "Then they tell us about how they want to buy us out, how big the business could get. As soon as I tell them no, they disappear. If they really agreed with Dad, they'd still be here. I have no friends in corporate America and I dislike ivory tower intellectuals. In that respect, I am a lot like Dad. You can have your cake and eat it to."

For his part, Ralph spreads the message whenever and wherever he can. His minivan is loaded down with bottles of soap. "If I ever got in an accident in the rain, they'd have a hard time finding me under the suds." He's generous with his words, time and soap, distributing soap to those he runs into during the course of the day.

He told the story of the company on the stage with New York singer/songwriter Dorothy Scott in an Off-off Broadway production and in Sturgeon Bay, with both shows benefiting charitable causes. He is a longtime member of The Coffeehouse on Wisconsin Avenue, the oldest running coffeehouse in Milwaukee. After last year's 9/11 attack, he took cases of soap and a cash donation down to Ground Zero. Even when he declines to support a charitable cause, friends have noted that he "gives out the nicest 'no' you'll ever get."

As a retired teacher, he still has a soft spot for kids, particularly those in the inner city. Armed with a guitar, he's performed impromptu concerts throughout the country. He has a standing invitation from some local schools to drop in and sing.

Though Ralph is not his father, it's easy to see many traits echoed through the generations. Ralph is passionate about his work, his causes and music, and he doesn't stop talking, a characteristic he admits sharing with his father.

"I never knew how Frank Sinatra could sing 'My Way' over and over again," he says. "But now I do. I never get tired of telling our story." ■