

# Zendo Project 2013: Psychedelic Harm Reduction Update

LINNAE PONTÉ



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[zendoproject.org](http://zendoproject.org)

WHILE PSYCHEDELICS AREN'T REQUIRED FOR a good time at festivals, for many they are part of the celebration of free expression and self-exploration. Of course, pushing boundaries of any sort can be overwhelming, which is why we offer psychedelic harm reduction for those in need. Since 2001, the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies (MAPS) has brought together a diverse team of therapists, doctors, researchers, and experienced peers to create a safe space and provide compassionate care at large transformational gatherings.

MAPS' first efforts helped establish today's world model for psychedelic harm reduction at BOOM festival in Portugal and provided volunteer recruitment and training in Sanctuary at Burning Man from 2003–2007. The second iteration of MAPS' harm reduction program, the Zendo Project, began in the summer of 2012, in our own village in Black Rock City with 60 volunteers. After this initial success, we quickly expanded our services to a circuit of international events.

The mission of the Zendo Project is to provide a supportive space to help guests obtain some benefits from difficult psychedelic experiences, reduce the number of psychedelic drug-related arrests and hospitalizations, and train volunteers to provide compassionate care. More generally, we strive to reduce the public's fear of psychedelics and encourage honest and responsible conversations about their use. Our work has shown that it is possible to reduce the risks associated with the non-medical use of psychedelics at the community level, and that there is an enormous amount of volunteer interest in doing so. Since our debut in 2012, Zendo volunteers have provided training and support at Envision (Costa Rica), Bicycle Day (San Francisco), AfrikaBurn (Tankwa, South Africa), Black Rock City (Nevada), and a handful of smaller events in California and Colorado (see below).

## ENVISION FESTIVAL 2013 (UVITA, COSTA RICA)

In February 2013, Zendo volunteers provided harm reduction services at Envision Festival in Uvita, a tropical hamlet on the Pacific edge of Costa Rica. Linnae Ponté and Sara Girón led a public training for volunteers, followed by a smaller private meeting with medical staff to discuss methods and techniques, and to develop triage protocols. With Zendo and medical spaces situated directly beside one another, the collaboration proved to be enormously helpful for both teams.

Twenty volunteers provided compassionate care throughout the event amidst the green jungle venue complete with swaying palms and a nearby waterfall that embodies the nation's catchphrase "*pura vida!*" One guest was almost arrested after being unwittingly dosed with LSD before security found him agitated and confused. Reflective of our ideal scenario, after volunteers worked with him, the guest returned the following

day to receive integration support and provide volunteers with feedback about his experience. It's not uncommon for guests who return to inquire about becoming a volunteer. Many of our existing team members are themselves working to give back to the community after receiving help during their own difficult experiences. In addition to many lessons learned this year, Envision taught us the value of reliable infrastructure as well as



*Linnae Ponté leads Zendo volunteer training at the Envision Festival.*



*A group of AfrikaBurners watching the sunrise on the Sand Clan.  
Photo credit: Mike Suss*



*Linnae Ponté and Zendo build volunteers begin construction in the Black Rock Desert.*

the importance of having bilingual volunteers from different cultural contexts at festivals where many attendees do not speak English as their primary language.

## 70TH ANNIVERSARY BICYCLE DAY PARTY (SAN FRANCISCO, CA)

In commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the discovery of LSD, over a thousand attendees celebrated at a large multi-stage venue in San Francisco. Psychedelic Science 2013 conference attendees took a cruise boat from Oakland's Jack London Square to San Francisco to join the party, which was independently hosted by Alex and Allyson Grey. Volunteers provided care in a small, secluded space on the bottom floor of the venue, keeping one guest from being hospitalized or arrested and assisting many others.

There was a great need for harm reduction at the overcrowded event, where finding a place to sit and regroup might have seemed like an insurmountable feat. Our team learned the importance of working directly with security staff to plan for post-event support since some guests were still in need of help after the night was over, an issue we never had to deal with at festivals. The event offered a valuable opportunity for international conference attendees to gain harm reduction experience to bring back to their local festivals. It also gave DanceSafe and Zendo volunteers a chance to work together and share ideas for future collaborations.

## AFRIKABURN 2013 (TANKWA, SOUTH AFRICA)

After attending the Zendo Project training at Burning Man in 2012, MAPS supporter and AfrikaBurn cofounder Mike Suss proposed bringing psychedelic harm reduction to the largest regional Burning Man event. Located in the Tankwa Karoo of Northern Cape Province, the barren desert that stretches for miles offers a perfect canvas for colorful art installations and costume. In its seventh year, AfrikaBurn 2013 brought together 7,500 international attendees for the weeklong festival that upholds Black Rock City's core principles of radical self-reliance, expression, inclusion, de-commodification, and gifting.

Volunteers provided a supportive space, compassionate care, and drug education while interfacing with medical staff, directors, and Rangers. Bringing together volunteers with different levels of experience created an environment analogous to a teaching hospital, where volunteers shared and compared techniques from their respective backgrounds. This was a strong example of how MAPS' harm reduction program provides a context for helping train the next generation of psychedelic therapists.

Working alongside the medical team and Rangers was crucial to our successful efforts at AfrikaBurn. Zendo volunteers

were dispatched to provide support in the field on several occasions, relieving medical staff from spending time with attendees who were only in need of psychological care. After seeing the value of psychedelic harm reduction in the field, medical personnel requested training for their staff. At AfrikaBurn 2014, medical and Zendo volunteers will work closely to further develop what may become the second leading model of psychedelic harm reduction (after Boom Festival in Portugal, where drugs are decriminalized and volunteers provide care as well as on-site thin layer chromatography adulterant screening).

## BURNING MAN 2013 (BLACK ROCK CITY, NEVADA)

After 60 Zendo volunteers assisted 108 guests at Burning Man in 2012, we returned to Black Rock City in 2013 motivated for the project's second iteration. The Zendo was located within

Fractal Planet, a 500-person music and art camp that received an award from the Burning Man organization for outstanding village. The main stage at Fractal Planet drew a large crowd—

around 10,000 on some nights—as did the art gallery, speaker's dome, and numerous art installations near the stage.

One hundred forty individuals participated in the four-hour Zendo training, including 26 medical professionals (physicians, nurses, EMTs) and 22 mental health professionals (psychotherapists, psychologists). Other attendees included students training to be therapists and social workers, experienced harm reduction volunteers from other events such as Shambhala, BOOM, and AfrikaBurn, and a handful of Burning Man Rangers and Emergency Services staff who were off-duty and out of uniform. Trainers included coordinator Linnae Ponté, co-coordinator and therapist Sara Girón, psychedelic researcher George Greer, M.D., Holotropic Breathwork expert Sheelo Bohm, Burning Man Mental Health team member Richard Gottlieb, and MAPS Executive Director Rick Doblin, Ph.D.

Throughout the week, we had over 150 guests in the Zendo, 124 of which had taken psychedelics prior to their arrival. Similar to 2012, the substances guests most often reported having taken before seeking help at the Zendo in 2013 were LSD (32) and psilocybin (21). Many guests come to integrate a previous psychedelic experience, in order to deepen and take away meaningful lessons. Others stop by in search of non-substance-related psychological support including relationship counseling or to seek out information about psychedelics. Finally, some pay their visit just for water and rest—and at a non-stop party in the middle of the desert—that's a very important service.

After an outstandingly successful Indiegogo fundraising campaign that raised \$17,786 for the Zendo Project, we brought a custom-built solar-powered cooling system for the Zendo space and 10 sets of two-way radios to facilitate cross-playa communication. Additionally, David Bronner, President of

*Bringing together volunteers with different levels of experience created an environment analogous to a teaching hospital.*



Dr. Bronner's Soaps and member of MAPS' Board of Directors, donated an art car called Rainbow Bridge to shuttle guests and volunteers from the field to the Zendo, and between the Zendo and the Full Circle Tea House, a sister harm reduction space founded by Annie Oak of the Women's Visionary Congress.

## POLITICAL DYNAMICS FOR HARM REDUCTION ARE SHIFTING

Two drug-related deaths at Electric Zoo, an event in New York held over Labor Day weekend 2013, further highlighted the need for festival organizers to prioritize attendees' health and safety by providing access to drug education and safe spaces to rest and hydrate.

The European organizers of TomorrowWorld, an electronic dance music (EDM) festival taking place from September 27–29, 2013 in Chattahoochee Hills, Georgia, took a progressive approach toward their three-day, 50,000 person-per-day event, as has become typical in Europe, where harm reduction is often required at festivals. In addition to the regular medical services, TomorrowWorld organizers paid for 20 DanceSafe volunteers' travel, accommodations, admission, and commissary. While adulterant screening was not permitted, DanceSafe staffed a festival-provided air-conditioned chill space beside the main medical station. Volunteers reported that many attendees expressed that "there should be something like this at every event."


TomorrowWorld offered a very public presentation of harm reduction with articles about it in *The New York Times* and *Rolling Stone*. Significantly, TomorrowWorld did not receive any negative backlash from media or law enforcement, with the organizers announcing "no deaths, no fights, no arrests, and

only 17 medical transports throughout the weekend." We thank the organizers of TomorrowWorld for taking this huge step in prioritizing their attendees' health and safety. By creating working models of psychedelic harm reduction, we are reducing the number of Drug War casualties and demonstrating our vision for a post-prohibition future.

## PSYCHEDELIC HARM REDUCTION SPEAKS LOUDLY TO THE POWER OF COLLABORATION

While festival culture reflects our need for connection and community, the Zendo Project is an exercise in self-reliance at the level of the psychedelic community. As we show that we can help one another, we also reduce public fears surrounding psychedelics, a crucial step in reintegrating these tools and the experiences they can engender back into society.

The success of the Zendo Project can be attributed to the efforts of hundreds of individuals that make up this broad international, multigenerational, and multicultural community. A perfect example of the principle of "radical participation," we thank everyone who volunteered their time to work in the Zendo, as well as those who donated time, money, and resources to enable MAPS to organize the project. Over the next year, Zendo volunteers will travel to the same circuit of events as well as a handful of local events in California.

To find out about volunteering for the Zendo Project in 2014, I invite you to write to us at [zendo@maps.org](mailto:zendo@maps.org). 

*Linnae Ponté is Executive and Clinical Research Assistant and Harm Reduction Coordinator at MAPS. She can be reached at [linnae@maps.org](mailto:linnae@maps.org).*

### ZENDO PROJECT 2013 GUEST FEEDBACK

*"I just needed a quiet, safe space away from lots of people and your volunteers were very compassionate."*

*"Thank you deeply to my sitter who listened and saw me at my most ugly and sad on the playa. Thank you also for providing this space. I only wish I had known about it earlier."*

*"I took two hits of acid and felt sick. I did not expect to be here or receive this service but I am so glad it was here... glad that someone made sure I am okay."*

*"We searched through loud dance party after loud dance party, we finally landed (by chance) in the sweet sanctuary of the Zendo. The amazing staff was kind, loving, compassionate, and just kickass in general. You guys are doing an incredible thing here. Keep up the fantastic work."*

### THE ZENDO PROJECT MISSION STATEMENT

*It is our mission to:*

- Provide a supportive space for individuals undergoing difficult psychedelic experiences or other psychological emergencies in order to help turn those experiences into opportunities for learning and personal growth, and to reduce the number of drug-related psychiatric hospitalizations.
- Create an environment where volunteers can work alongside one another to improve their harm reduction skills and receive training and feedback.
- Demonstrate that safe, productive psychedelic experiences are possible without the need for law enforcement-based policies.

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