



The Selling of Ecstasy

How a Sarasota college student became the Timothy Leary of the '80s.

By Jeff Leen

In the glow of Sarasota's magnificent sunsets, 31-year-old perpetual student Rick Doblin is marking a psychedelic revival...

Three adults and two young children sit at a kitchen table set according to a homey logic: a bowl of onions and potatoes...

Her youthful energy makes it difficult to believe that she is, at 36, the mother of five children.

Nearby the two children, her children, are eating ice cream.

Then she drops this: She's given the drug to her children. To her 16-year-old son, who wasn't doing well at school...

"She told me she was going to die," the woman says. "I thought if the kid Adam as a therapeutic drug, it might give her some insight...

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It is a good question. Rick Doblin has been an undergraduate for 14 years.

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He talks about his high school days in the St. Petersburg area.

"I was so shy," he says. "I thought Beatle songs were silly love songs. That's how I missed the '60s."

One of Rick's friends, a young man in his late 20s, walks up to him and says, "I've been in a real rut, the young man says after a while...

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For more than a year, he has been in touch with the DEA and the FDA and the World Health Organization...

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It's pronounced "ecstasy." They're calling it the yuppie high, the drug of the '80s.

Rick Doblin says it offers inner peace. Is this utopia in a capsule... or just another bad trip?

Rick Doblin smiles in approval.

It is a seductive notion, a drug to end despair. Mankind's search for the perfect drug has been imperfect.

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some pretty good times!"

It's been in Life magazine. It's been in Doonbury.

Ecstasy proponents believe their drug could ease psychic pain, treat cocaine addiction, comfort terminal cancer patients and ease all sorts of tensions — even global tensions.

The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration says it could cause permanent brain damage.

It was an unlikely controversy, it spawned an unlikely spokesman: Rick Doblin, 31, obese college student from Sarasota.

For six months, Doblin has been quoted in minute detail, and he sees meanings and connections in almost everything that touches it.

Doblin does not carry the credentials of the psychedelic guru of the past. He is not a Harvard professor, like Leary was, nor an artist-philosopher like Aldous Huxley or an anthropologist like Carlos Castaneda.

Living in the suburbs of Sarasota, Rick Doblin's house sits at the end of a straight-as-an-arrow, dead-end street. He has spent more than 13 years examining his life in minute detail, and he sees meanings and connections in almost everything that touches it.

He says he built his house when he was 21, intending it to serve as a "metaphor for the center" in his life.

The metaphor required a lot of money; it cost more than \$100,000 — \$80,000 from a trust fund left to Doblin by his grandfather and \$20,000 borrowed from his parents.

The house is a three-story rectangle of weathered cedar that towers above the surrounding pine. Inside, a 20-foot ceiling rises toward exposed cedar beams sheltering imposing walls of solid granite.

The net is a big, opulent cabin in the woods.

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Photography by C.W. Griffin

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When he tried it with his girlfriend, "It was one of the most loving days of my life," he says.

A year later, when Doblin and his girlfriend had broken up, he found himself having one of the loneliest days of his life.

There, floating in the darkness and waiting for a solution, "I got the sense out of that I could either crumble or my work could grow through the problems," he says.

To Doblin, psychedelic psychotherapy is more than just a profession. It is something like a mythic quest. Not long after the sojourn in the isolation tank, Doblin had a dream.

For three years, Rick Doblin has been a member of a small, tightly knit underground that includes eminent Harvard psychiatrists, prominent psychotherapists, brilliant researchers and sojourners in the psychedelic underground.

Some of these men and women synthesized MDMA way back in the late 1960s. He usually is clandestine California labs. For a decade, these doctors and therapists quietly used the drug to treat people with marital problems, people with cancer and — in some cases — people with nothing more pressing than curiosity.

Then, in June 1985, the DEA announced an emergency ban putting MDMA in Schedule I of the Controlled Substances Act, the same classification as heroin and LSD.

Long before the Ecstasy story broke, Rick Doblin was behind the scenes, orchestrating a serious but somewhat quixotic campaign to keep the drug from being outlawed.

When the publicity was started coming to MDMA, Rick says, "the attitude of a lot of the people was, 'We've been thinking of

using about five to 15 times the therapeutic doses."

So far, it's not a major street drug problem; it's a major street drug problem.

There has been no MDMA fatalities at the clinic. There has been no evidence of irreversible brain damage.

Even as the media fires begin to cool, the political and legal battle over MDMA heats up.

It's not as if Doblin is a naive idealist. He is neither one person, one theory, one belief, one book nor one pill that will lead to total satisfaction.

This state can only be achieved by taking the time to accept life as it is. This may not be the "crucial gratification" however, it is complete gratification.

Valerie Dworkin, a Los Angeles writer, says, "You really get to a lot of intimacy," she says.

There is something about the woman that makes her seem different from the others.

"I'm not as infatuated with it as I used to be," she says. "Anything you fall in love with after a while reality sets in. You get to know what it is and you realize that you're using this to have a good time. You're relying on something else to get it done."

It's just a drug.

tripping," Doblin says.

The floors are made of river gravel — soothing on bare feet. A 20-panel stained-glass window is spiraled, beautiful to look at — shades down from the head of the stairs.

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Rick points out that his friend has a cigarette in his hand, right now.

It's a very busy day. He has been very busy most days, since the Ecstasy story broke.

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People Are Talking Shows in San Francisco calls to say it can't pay his air fare but can he come anyway?

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