



Tribune photos by SUSAN KIRKMAN

Rick Doblin has become a spokesman for MDMA, known as "Ecstasy," and termed "the drug of the '80s."

Rick Doblin is pictured on his waterbed with his art-wolf dog, Wolf.

A valuable mission or bad trip for Doblin?

By PAUL LOMARTIRE
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SARASOTA — Rick Doblin, a 31-year-old Sarasota resident and University of South Florida student at the New College campus, has cast himself in the role of a key player in an ongoing controversy involving MDMA, a psychedelic drug.

Over the past several weeks, Doblin has been written about in Newsweek, the Washington Post and New York magazine, and in

April he was asked to be a guest on the (Phil) "Donahue" show. His phone keeps ringing with requests for interviews. Friday he was shadowed by a reporter from NBC News.

The reason: Doblin, 31, has become a spokesman for MDMA, touted by proponents through names and labels such as "Ecstasy," and "the drug of the '80s."

Through The Earth Metabolic Design Foundation, a non-profit pro-psychedelic drug research group he co-founded, Doblin has become a spokesman for the pro-MDMA force who want the federal government to allow them to research MDMA for possible thera-

peutic uses. That effort is being financed mainly through donations to The Earth Metabolic Design Foundation.

Doblin's personal stake is that he wants eventually to research the drug in Sarasota. First he wants to assist MDMA research — a six-month study on animals tentatively for Harvard University — and follow that with further testing on humans at the New College campus of the University of South Florida.

Doblin is willing to wait for final government approval for MDMA testing to do his senior thesis on the drug. His mission now is to keep the Drug Enforcement Administration-Food and Drug Administration door open on MDMA — just enough to allow research.

The federal Drug Enforcement Administration, is the main opponent to the pro-MDMA group. It is on record as saying that MDMA can lead to paranoid delusions, elevated blood pressure, severe jaw clenching

and possible permanent brain damage.

Citing those reasons and the fact MDMA has no current medical value, two weeks ago the agency temporarily placed MDMA as a Schedule I controlled-substance in the same classification as heroin and LSD, effective July 1.

On that date, production or sale of MDMA will carry up to a 15-year penalty and/or a \$125,000 fine. Possession will be a misdemeanor.

After public hearings, which began Monday in Los Angeles and are scheduled to continue throughout the summer in Kansas City and Washington, D.C., the agency will assign MDMA a permanent classification, sometime next year.

Late Friday afternoon just before leaving for the Los Angeles hearings, Doblin was at his home, sitting in his bedroom, a jazz tape playing quietly. He recounted his involvement with MDMA.

"I decided a conflict with the government was inevitable," he says. "I knew about MDMA 2½ years ago. So, I thought the best way to go was to work with the government. I thought the best way to go was to the heart of the opposition — Nancy Reagan."

He wrote to the first lady, known for her stands on drug abuse, to plead the case for MDMA research.

"They felt it was respectful," he explains. "They're the experts on drug abuse. They felt I'm not the enemy. I was referred to the chief of drug abuse."

Doblin and a Baltimore psychiatrist/researcher, the only person with permission to work with LSD, met with the federal government's drug abuse heads several times to lead for an open door to psychedelic drug research.

MDMA, a derivative of off of saffron or 1 of nutmeg, is chemically known as 3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine. It was patented in 1914 as a possible appetite suppressant and was promptly forgotten.

MDMA, Doblin says, is easy to make; it costs about \$1 to produce a 100-milligram dose. It popped up on college campuses in California and the Northeast about three years ago and has spread by word-of-mouth ever since.

Gene Haislip, the drug agency's deputy assistant administrator, says he doesn't know Doblin personally, but he's heard of him and is familiar with the pro-MDMA movement.

Haislip says pro-MDMA people "don't understand the operation of our laws and how it pertains to this problem."

Haislip explains the agency placed MDMA in Schedule I because it had two things required for the classification reserved for the most dangerous of drugs — the potential for problems and no known medical use.

"You have to remember, these people who have been doing MDMA for some time ... there's research not yet published that it causes brain damage," he says, adding, the unpublished research was done on MDMA's parent drug MDA.

"Scientists and my staff," he says, "believe MDMA will cause the same brain damage. That's something we didn't even know six months ago."

As for the pro-MDMA contention held by Doblin and researchers that once a drug is classified in Schedule I, FDA permission to test the drug becomes virtually non-existent, Haislip says, "That's not right."

"That Schedule I group is set up to be in a research status. We'll register anyone who steps forward," Haislip says. To date, he adds, more than 2,050 people and institutions have been granted permission to research Schedule I drugs.

Haislip is aware, he says, that since MDMA became news, several psychiatrists, psychologists and therapists who are MDMA proponents have reported treating patients with the drug. They contend the value of MDMA is that it dissolves emotional barriers and increases communication — in short, opening mental doors that normally would take months or years of psychotherapy to open.

"These people who have been using MDMA, giving it to patients," Haislip continues, "I speculate, and this is knowledgeable speculation, the FDA would say, 'You're risking people's lives. This hasn't even been given to animals.'" In other words, Haislip concludes, the answer to research would be "no."

Currently, the only research being done on MDMA is at Intox Laboratory in Redfield, Ark. Dr. Phillip Goad has been hired by Doblin's Earth Metabolic Foundation to do pre-clinical toxicity testing as required by the FDA before an application can be made for further animal and human testing.

Doblin was given MDMA by a girlfriend two years ago. Today he's aligned with a pro-MDMA group populated by researchers who want permission to test MDMA. He agrees with government officials that it shouldn't be made available to the public until tested.

He says he takes MDMA about once a month. The last time, he says, he took 300 milligrams throughout a day of canoeing and hiking around an island near Sarasota. Once, he says, he took a dose of MDMA and laid in his isolation tank. "It was really peaceful," he recalls.

When you take MDMA, he says, "It's almost like your mind can be clearer between the seconds of habit behavior. It moves you into your feelings. If I could use one word to describe MDMA, it would be 'acceptance' — you accept where you are. It defines it."

Being unabashedly honest about MDMA has gotten Doblin in trouble recently with some of the conservative, academic-types in the pro-MDMA group. For that reason, he recently resigned as an officer in the The Earth Metabolic Design Foundation.

Raised in an upper-middle class Chicago home, Doblin is the son of a Chicago pediatrician who currently runs an alcohol and drug-abuse clinic.

He then mentions a fact he says is sometimes misrepresented in national stories about him. It involves a trust fund — about \$150,000 — set up by his grandfather, who owned a Chicago metal-stamping factory.

Doblin says he has been portrayed as a rich kid using the trust fund he was given when he turned 21 to take a media joy ride for his favorite drug. That bothers him a bit because, he explains, it's not true.

"I managed to lose all my money in the construction business," he says. "But he adds, his parents had to help him pay for his house."

Now Doblin has immersed himself in the MDMA controversy. On the day he talked, Doblin had spent the afternoon at an MDMA panel discussion he had organized at a private Sarasota psychiatric hospital. The mayor of Sarasota attended, along with about 20 others, including psychiatrists, social workers, psychology students, nurses, counselors and other mental health professionals.

In April, Doblin traveled to Geneva, Switzerland, and camped out at the meeting of the World Health Organization. He says he plans to attend all three public hearings on MDMA.

Also later this summer, he says he would like to apply to the FDA for an application to research MDMA use on his grandmother, who suffers from severe depression.

His physician/father opposes it, though. Morton Doblin says that a psychiatrist familiar with MDMA has been consulted and that the conclusion was, "He would hold off use of the chemical at this time."

Where would he like all this to take him?

He doesn't hesitate. "I would like to be a therapist for government officials — that would combine psychology and politics. They control the world. I want to help them steady their hand on the button."

Doblin plans to enter the medical field as a psychedelic psychotherapist, a fact, he said, his dad is slowly beginning to accept.

"He sends me clippings about MDMA," Doblin says. "I think he finally thinks it's legitimate, but I think he wishes the things I do weren't always illegal or becoming illegal. I wish the same thing."

Reached by phone at his Chicago office, Dr. Morton Doblin politely declined to comment directly on his son's MDMA involvement. But he did say he favors qualified research on chemicals to find out if they have any medical value.

"By placing MDMA in Schedule I, you limit the possible research," Morton Doblin explains. "You end up not having any good documented research."

Placing MDMA in Schedule I, he adds, also would dampen enthusiasm for future testing of the drug.

After graduating from high school, Doblin enrolled at Sarasota's New College, now a campus of the University of South Florida, but he didn't stay long. His suffered from an ailment common to many of the '60s generation — psychic boredom.

"I wanted to pay attention to my emotions," he says. "I was ahead of myself intellectually and behind myself emotionally. It seemed I was becoming smarter but not wiser."

Along the way he became fascinated by possible medical uses for psychedelic drugs. "LSD fascinated me. I wanted to study it."

He left school and Sarasota. "I traveled, hitchhiked around, went through primal therapy. I even took a three-day workshop with Stan Grof, who's really a pioneer in psychedelic research."

Eventually he returned to Sarasota. With his dad's blessing, he used his tuition money to build a handball court for the university. It took the former handball champion a year to complete the donated project, which he says proudly, enjoys heavy use today. Eventually, he turned to building, which began an eight-year career. "I figured, 'There's no way to study psychedelics, so I'll build.'"

He values his years as a builder. "I knew I'd return to (study) psychedelics. My friends thought it was cute I wanted to be an LSD therapist. But I needed strength psychologically. All that time I worked I was learning how the world really worked."

"The only way to know your limit is to exceed it," he continues. "I took challenges, like building four houses at once."