

LENDING A HAND AT BURNING MAN: PSYCHEDELIC EMERGENCY SERVICES IN THE BLACK ROCK DESERT

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For our third project in providing psychedelic emergency services, MAPS volunteers joined 30,000 other participants in the Black Rock Desert for Burning Man 2003. Burning Man is often described as an exercise in radical self-reliance: with a ban on vending, and a remote location in the harsh Nevada desert, participants are expected to provide everything from their own food and water to their own creative energy, entertainment, and bizarre costumes. The result is Black Rock City: an interactive landscape of surreal sculpture, whimsical vehicles, and spontaneous fun.

Self-reliance, however, is balanced by community support. The “city” thrives on a gift economy, with a strong ethic of helping one another on survival needs, art projects, and emotional concerns. In fact, this community support is built into the infrastructure of Burning Man, in the form of a volunteer team of non-confrontational mediators: the Black Rock Rangers. These folks patrol the city, helping people

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set up their tents, assisting in disputes with neighbors, and addressing safety concerns. When necessary, they work with the medical and fire teams, and coordinate with outside law enforcement.

Mostly, however, the Rangers help people

to solve problems themselves, gently offering help when needed and otherwise staying behind the scenes, working to create a safe environment for people to have their own experiences. It’s an approach that sounds almost like psychedelic therapy. As you might imagine, the MAPS team was very happy to work with this group to offer our own volunteer efforts.

MAPS volunteers worked alongside the Black Rock Rangers in Sanctuary, a geodesic dome adjacent to the medical tent. Our group included Sandra Karpetas, who has worked with MAPS on similar projects and now helps to run the Iboga Therapy House in Vancouver; Dr. John Halpern, a psychiatrist researching psychedelics at Harvard Medical School’s McLean Hospital; trauma counselor Kate Sorenson; “Sam”, an underground psychedelic therapist; and from the MAPS staff, myself and Rick Doblin. Other volunteers were Mark Brennan, Suez Holland and Steven Oldridge. In order to learn the Ranger system and better understand the layout and workings of Burning Man, several of us underwent Ranger training and went out patrolling on mentor shifts. A few of us even became full-fledged Rangers, which allowed us

to use staff radios to listen for incidents and communicate with other volunteers.

One of the reasons MAPS has undertaken psychedelic emergency work is to demonstrate how the psychedelic community can care for its own. Even when experiences become frightening or disturbing, medical or law enforcement intervention is often unnecessary if compassionate, experienced friends are present. Black Rock City is an amazing model of how a community can show responsibility and compassion. And psychedelics, while not used by everyone (or even by most), are, for many, part of the festival's celebration of free expression and pushing the limits of possibility.

Of course, boundary-pushing of any kind can be overwhelming, which is why the Rangers created Sanctuary. This is a place where people can recover from, or at least sort through, the stress of obnoxious campmates, strained relationships, or failed art projects. While a professional crisis intervention team is available to handle the most serious concerns (for instance, domestic violence or tragic accidents), the Sanctuary staff provides an emotional safety net for the Burning Man community. People suffering from sleep deprivation can find a quiet place to nap, and staffers distressed by incidents on shift can find a friendly ear to listen.

As the chaotic activity of the event builds over the week, Sanctuary sees more visitors, and a number of these folks were having difficult trips. We had several very powerful opportunities to work with people in psychedelic states. Three individuals, in particular, had what seemed to be especially meaningful experiences,

touching on some of the most powerful events in life: birth, parenting, and death.

Early in the week, Sandra worked with a woman who was brought in because her loud yelling disturbed her campmates. She wanted to know if she had permission to let go and feel

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safe, asking, “Can I do what I need to do? Can I be vulnerable?” When she felt that she could, she proceeded to have what I can't help but see as a classic Grof experience: she lived out the symbolic act of giving birth. Lying on the floor, for hours she sweated, groaned, and underwent contractions, until at dawn, she apparently gave birth...to herself. She slowly returned to normal consciousness, feeling that she had undergone a process that was important and cathartic. She explained later that earlier in life, she'd had an abortion, an issue that arose powerfully during her psychedelic experience. Far from being a psychotic episode, as her “freaking out” might have been treated in another context, this birth process was relevant and healing in her ordinary life.

Peter also had an experience that turned out to be quite meaningful in his life. When he came in, he was extremely agitated and confused, complaining he felt uncomfortable and alternately too hot or too cold. He told us he believed he'd been dosed,



MAPS volunteer Sandra Karpetas prepares a meal at Burning Man.

though as he grew more comfortable with those helping him, he said he'd taken a hit of LSD. He seemed to trust those in the room, but felt he didn't deserve their help, frequently over-thanking everyone. At one point, he worried that he was going to die, and he would never get to see his son again.

Along with one of the Rangers, the underground psychedelic therapist on our team, "Sam", helped Peter to open up to his fears, encouraging him to use movement and sound to release his anxiety. The following morning, Rick helped him think through his experience, and discovered a symbolic component to his seemingly unreasonable fears the night before. In order to come to Burning Man, Peter missed an opportunity to be with his son, of whom he does not have custody, and his guilt and anxiety over his family life led to his "bad trip." Dealing with these issues directly as he came down from the trip, he felt that the experience was enormously helpful, likening it to "five years of therapy."

Dave was another participant who initially was afraid to admit he took psychedelics. His friend brought him in, explaining that Dave was having a panic attack, a regular occurrence for him. Rick sat and talked with him, and as Dave came to feel more comfortable, he revealed that he had taken mushrooms that night. As his story

unfolded, he explained that his panic attack had a serious and specific cause: he had a terminal cancer diagnosis, and did not expect to live for very long. Often, as in Peter's case, the understanding people have of their lives while on psychedelics is a symbolic one. However, after talking to Dave's friends later on, we learned that Dave's story was true. With Rick's help, he started to face his fears, even becoming calm and comfortable as he discussed the end of his life. He talked about how he hoped to end his own life when the pain became overwhelming. Accepting the inevitability of his own passing, he was even able to reflect on the needs of others, thinking of how best to say goodbye to his daughter and the rest of his family.

Each of these people was able, with the help of an experienced guide, to turn a difficult experience into a valuable one. Even in the hectic environment of an outdoor festival, even when fearing legal or other repercussions, they were able to turn inward and use their own resources to work through hard issues. Not only does this speak to the value of psychedelic therapy, I would also argue that it reflects the capacity of individual lay people to use psychedelics beneficially. I disagree with those who feel psychedelics should only be in the hands of experts, like licensed therapists or religious practitioners. I think that despite the risks inherent in recreational use, a society with legal psychedelics would develop a body of knowledge and experience among users that would minimize harmful consequences. Burning Man's do-it-yourself ethos is a celebration of the potential of regular people. From what I've seen there and elsewhere, people do have the potential to take care of one another, and have valuable, healing experiences with psychedelics in a recreational context.

I have to admit I was a little disappointed that I personally didn't have the chance to work with anyone in a profound psychedelic state. I had a fantastic conversation with a dehydrated woman, sat with a drunken pilot who mistakenly



Lamplighters prepare to illuminate Black Rock City

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thought he was dosed (until he fell asleep), and helped a possibly tripping, but definitely drunken participant look for her purse. But even though I didn't get to learn much about how an individual can work with and integrate psychedelic states, I learned a lot about how a community can. For me, the best part of helping at Sanctuary was being part of a group that not only valued psychedelic experience, and supported individuals through difficult spaces, but also functioned as part of a community, creating a context for these experiences within a bigger whole.

Much of what takes place at Burning Man is not quite translatable to everyday life. The temporary paradise in the desert couldn't exist if people didn't work the rest of the year, saving the money for all the generators and turntables that create the electric playground for a week. High-intensity celebration and exploration can only last so long.

What's amazing, however, are the values that are expressed in this transitory city. Even though it's just a few days long, Burning Man requires an enormous amount of organization. This is both for its internal functioning (to build and maintain its structure, ensure the safety and wellbeing of participants, and protect its natural environment), and its external relations (to live harmoniously with communities nearby and interface effectively with outside law enforcement and regulatory agencies). Yet Black Rock City is run by a paradox, an almost utopian bu-

reaucracy. This relatively non-hierarchical system honors individual personalities and experiences, living its values as it performs its functions. I believe these values include a respect for the benefits of psychedelics, and a sense of responsibility to protect individuals from the unwarranted intrusion of others' value systems or outside institutions — such as the Drug War.

I was grateful to have the opportunity to participate in such a unique organization. I think Burning Man offers a glimpse of what's possible when people work together to express their idealism in the real world, holding onto a vision in the dust and sweat and toil of reality. Which reminds me a little of MAPS. With the support of our own unique community, we can continue the struggle toward a policy on psychedelics and marijuana that's founded on solid research, common sense, and compassion. It's slow, but it's inspiring — and sometimes it's even a whole lot of fun. ■

This thank you note is from a Burning Man participant – also a therapist – who, with his girlfriend, talked with our volunteers while on MDMA. They were working through a difficult LSD experience they'd had earlier in the week:

“I wanted to thank you for the help you gave us at Sanctuary – running into you when we did was a godsend, as I can't imagine meeting my girlfriend's parents later that week with her in the state she was in. She describes feeling the ‘dust settle’ in her mind, and although the initial surge of wellbeing she felt immediately after the therapy has receded somewhat, leaving some anxieties to resurface, to me at least she seems back to her old self. Incredible! I never imagined I would be experiencing such psychotherapy as a patient before I did it as a doctor!”