

Zendo Project 2012: Harm Reduction in the Black Rock Desert

LINNAE PONTÉ



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FOR MOST ATTENDEES, THE YEARLY FESTIVAL in Black Rock City, Nevada, is a break from normal life and an opportunity to build community among a thriving city of art, music, and entertainment. For me this year, it was one of the most challenging, but also productive and rewarding weeks I've experienced during my time with MAPS. Kynthia Brunette, MAPS Operations Associate and co-coordinator of the Zendo Project, and I traveled to Black Rock City to establish a harm reduction space for individuals having a difficult psychedelic experience to receive compassionate care. With the help of 60 volunteers, including 12 medical professionals and many trained therapists, we provided space, water, and care for over 100 guests throughout the week.

Let's face it: Large art festivals already have the ingredients for an intense, mind-expanding experience. For first-timers, who typically represent the majority of guests in harm reduction spaces, a week of ongoing auditory and visual stimulation, physical exertion, and sleep deprivation is enough to propel many to search for solace. Toss in a dose of LSD or psilocybin, and you might be in for an overwhelming experience. In the famous words of Humphrey Osmond, who coined the term "psychedelic" in 1965, "to fathom hell or soar angelic, just take a pinch of psychedelic." Often times, when an individual is having a difficult trip, having someone to talk about what's going on, or simply the presence of another person, can make a big difference.

Our presence on the playa this year had great significance for another reason, being the first time in five years that MAPS has independently offered harm reduction services at festivals. MAPS began offering support at festivals, starting at BOOM in Portugal in 2001, where KosmiCare was established. In 2003, Valerie Mojeiko, MAPS Director of Operations, and others volunteered with Black Rock Rangers who were sympathetic to the need of harm reduction services, and this collaboration grew to become quite large over the five years that followed.

Unfortunately, as the U.S. Drug War continued to escalate, so did the perverse criminalization of harm reduction services, and over time MAPS' involvement in Sanctuary at Burning Man came to an end, while KosmiCare, in Portugal where drugs are decriminalized, has flourished.

Today, BOOM's KosmiCare is the world's closest model to a post-prohibition world, with on-site thin layer chromatography pill testing and a centralized space sponsored by both the festival and the local government. KosmiCare works with the local hospital, fire department, paramedics, security, and regional harm-reduction teams. This past July, MAPS Executive Director Rick Doblin and I attended BOOM and worked with KosmiCare volunteers, who provided support for approximately 200 guests. While on-site services are important, we also recognize that making honest and accurate information about drugs available to the public is just as essential to harm reduction, and we're grateful to Erowid (erowid.org) for creating and maintaining the online psychoactive vault, which receives about 100,000 visitors daily.

When we decided to bring the Zendo Project to the playa this year, we knew there would be many challenges. Our biggest concerns were finding enough volunteers willing to commit their time and energy to the project, and being prepared for any potential medical or psychological crises. After sending out a call for volunteers via the MAPS Email Newsletter and Evolver's email list, we received an enormous number of replies, so many that we had to stop accepting applications weeks before the event, speaking to the enthusiasm and momentum of the endeavor. Still, it was unclear whether we would have enough medical professionals for at least one physician, nurse, or EMT to be present each shift to triage guests experiencing a medical emergency, if the need arose. We met our goal in early August and also purchased two MURS radios so we would be able to communicate directly with the festival's medical services.

Our four-hour training took place on Tuesday, August 28,

with 81 attendees present. Trainers included Marcela Ot'alara, M.A., L.P.C., the Principal Investigator of the upcoming MAPS study in Boulder that will investigate MDMA-assisted psychotherapy for posttraumatic stress disorder in U.S. veterans and survivors of sexual abuse, assault, and rape. Marcela provided information about therapist self-care and techniques for working with trauma. Katherine MacLean, PhD, of the Johns Hopkins research team that is conducting empirical investigations of psilocybin and spirituality, shared techniques and principles of psychedelic harm reduction. Annie Oak, founder of the Women's Visionary Congress and the Saraswati Tea House, shared the code of ethics she has created after years of harm reduction experience. Rick Doblin shared the history of MAPS' involvement in this part of our mission as well as tips for working with a difficult psychedelic experience. Additionally, three medical professionals presented on potential medical issues that volunteers might encounter, such as dehydration and overheating, along with ways to distinguish between a psychedelic state and signs of psychosis.

Over the course of the week, we had 108 guests in the Zendo, 46 of whom had taken psychedelics prior to their arrival. The other 62 guests came to the Zendo seeking support to integrate a previous experience, to rest, or in search of information about psychedelics. The substances guests most often reported having taken before seeking help at the Zendo were LSD (25 guests) and psilocybin (10 guests). Luckily, we did not have any medical situations, besides the minor cut or scrape, for which the first aid kit came in handy.

While the Zendo provides a service to the community, it also offers the opportunity for individuals trained in psychedelic-assisted therapy to share their techniques with other therapists, doctors, and students. There are many individuals who are well versed in the theoretical components of psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy, but have little to no practical experience applying the methods. The Zendo is a space where this is possible, if and when a guest is open to a therapeutic approach. Of course, because the community of psychedelic-assisted psychotherapists is so small and mostly underground, most everyone played the role of both teacher and student during their shifts in the Zendo.

Volunteers and guests were asked to provide feedback about their time in the Zendo verbally or via written feedback forms submitted on-site or after the event. Many individuals reported that they felt more comfortable during the week just knowing the Zendo was available if they or someone they knew needed assistance. Many guests, after having a positive experience, expressed interest in returning next year to volunteer. It was apparent from the start of the burn that the Zendo needs to be farther away from the sound stage next year, as the booming bass of Fractal Nation felt quite cacophonous to many. Additionally, a separate space for volunteers to hang out seems important, and we'll try to make this happen so there is more space for guests in need.

An organizer from Nectar Village, home to the Hee-

BeeGeeBee Healers, Steam Bath Project, and Camp Contact, expressed interest in hosting the Zendo Project next year. We decided, instead, to setup a satellite Zendo space in their camp. With Nectar Village near Center Camp, Saraswati Tea House at 9:00, and the Zendo at 2:00, we'll have harm reduction spaces at all ends of the playa. In order to shuttle guests and volunteers from one place to another, we'd also like to have a psychedelic art car. David Bronner has offered to provide part (but not all) of the funds for the art car and we still need volunteers willing to help with the build and transportation.

We estimate that the Zendo Project 2012 cost roughly \$10,000, including construction, tickets, transportation, accommodations, staff time, and supplies. With twice the volunteers needed next year, our expenses will definitely be greater. Generously, Zendo volunteer Lucas Jushinski has pledged \$10,000 for the Zendo Project 2013, stating:

"I believe that harm reduction should be a part of every festival. It makes sense to create a space filled with loving people who care about the health and well being of others. A space where people who are having challenging psychedelic experiences can come and get help from trained counselors who understand what guests are going through. I mean, who wouldn't want to support a beautiful project like this?"

MAPS would like to thank everyone who volunteered their time to work in the Zendo, as well as those who donated money and resources to enable MAPS to organize the project. Appropriately enough, the theme for this year's festival was "Fertility." It's a new beginning for MAPS' involvement in harm reduction, and we hope to see the Zendo Project grow as abundantly in future years as it has in 2012. 🌱

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THE ZENDO PROJECT MISSION STATEMENT

The mission of the MAPS Zendo Project is to:

- Provide a supportive space for individuals undergoing difficult psychedelic experiences or other psychological challenges in order to transform potentially traumatic experiences into valuable learning opportunities, 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.