

# Psychedelic Harm Reduction in the Festival Industry: An Interview with Do LaB Co-Founder Dede Flemming

WITH LINNAE PONTÉ, MAPS DIRECTOR OF HARM REDUCTION  
AND ZENDO PROJECT COORDINATOR



Dede Flemming



*Linnae Ponté, MAPS Director of Harm Reduction, spoke with Dede Flemming, co-founder of festival and event production company The Do LaB, to talk about growing support in the festival industry for psychedelic harm reduction services at events.*

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**Linnae Ponté (LP):** On a personal level, how did you get involved in festival production and what about it inspires you?

**Dede Flemming (DF):** Well, I stumbled upon working in the festival world with my brothers. We always entertained and threw parties and did fun stuff growing up, and when we all moved out to Los Angeles at various different times we ended up together. When we started Do LaB it was kind of an art collective, just creating big art. After doing that, and being inspired by Burning Man and Coachella we wanted to throw our own festival. We ended up doing that back in 2004, really, and it was just kind of something that we were inspired to do. We liked the idea of large gatherings, but we liked it even better to be able to throw our own and do it the way we really want to do it. That's where it started and, you know, it's just grown.

**LP:** I get a taste of that when I get some friends together and go camping, and I think, well, if we brought ten friends and our friends who do music, this could be a small festival. Is there anything in particular in the next few years that you are planning to see evolve with the company that you're especially excited about?

**DF:** The company over the last couple of years has grown tremendously. LIB [Lightning in a Bottle] has grown in size, we started Woogie Weekend, we partnered with Dirtybird [record label] and came out with the Dirtybird Campout. So, for the future what we're looking at is taking those three brands, honing in on them, and making them as best they can be. We are flirting with the idea of going to the East Coast to try something. We've been talking about a new event that we want to do for years that has been stalled a little bit because it's a much larger event. We're still excited about the possibility of that—that's what the future holds as of now.

**LP:** Would you say that you based the model of Lightning in a Bottle and the other two smaller events on Burning Man, with its principles of radical self-reliance?

**DF:** Not entirely, because we are certainly not telling people that they need to be radically self-reliant. We have food vendors, merchant vendors, and camps that they can come to where everything's set up for them. So it's different in many regards from Burning Man. I think the similarities are the type of people that are attracted to our events, who are also very much attracted to Burning Man. It's very much a creative community of people—individuals not necessarily looking to other people for permission for their creative expression, but who are just willing to get out there and be themselves. So, that's what makes the common denominators whether it's the art, the people, the customs, the music, or the energy. Burning Man is still part of our

lives every year. But there are differences, mainly that we're an almost fully curated event while Burning Man leaves it up to the people to curate it.

**LP:** This may seem like a generic question, but I'm really interested in how you personally see the role that festivals have in our society and culture today, and how they are evolving together.

**DF:** Yeah, it's interesting watching it happen. Some people just go to one festival a year, and some don't go to any, but more and more people are going to many festivals each year. They are forgoing their vacation time to go to a beach somewhere, or to go to Europe and travel around. Instead, lots of people are spending their hard-earned money going to multiple music festivals a year. This is their vacation. This is their education. This is their place to explore and be with their friends and many are spending their most formative years going to these festivals. Whether the festivals know it or not, or acknowledge it, or take advantage of it, or harness that responsibility, they are, in fact, shaping this generation.

Obviously, these things are multi-generational, but for the bulk of the audience, they're millennials. There is a little bit of responsibility here. How do we present them the best product that's going to get the best result, that's going to make people feel really good about themselves? Let's teach them something—that's a big part of what we do. Give them a memorable experience. Give them a place where they can make friends, make lovers, you know. I think everyone involved has a certain level of responsibility to appreciate what it is that we have the opportunity to do, or what it is that we are doing.

**LP:** For me that totally encapsulates it. I work with a really great, progressive non-profit, and still, when it comes down to it, it's a 40-hour a week job, and having the opportunity to get away by going to a festival and have a full-on immersion experience with my friends is something that me and other people of our generation absolutely crave. Festivals provide this adult playground space where we can co-create, and dream, and envision together.

**DF:** That's just it. We're trying to have fun. It's like you said: We have created a pretty cool place for people to work and I think my job is pretty awesome, but it is a job and there's a lot that goes into it. It's running a business at the end of the day, and if we don't take time to step back and have some fun, goofy moments then what are we doing it for?

**LP:** Yes, having fun and working hard go well together! Of course, we both know that festivals can also be challenging environments for some people, especially when psychedelics are involved. What does psychedelic harm reduction mean to you, and why did you invite the Zendo Project to Lightning in a Bottle last year? What do you see as the benefits?

**DF:** We look at the Zendo Project as just as important as our medical teams and our security teams because, although we don't condone drug use at our events, we have to be prepared

for dealing with everything. Whether it's someone that tripped and broke their leg, or someone that's having a rough psychedelic experience, we have to make sure that we have the appropriate tools to address these things. We're working with MAPS and the Zendo Project since it's the best out there for providing the necessary team and tools and safe space. Year after year, we get the reports back and we see how important it is that we have you and your team out there, because you are the experts in this field. I think it would be incredibly irresponsible of us to look the other way and say, "No, drugs are illegal, we don't condone drugs, so we're going to pretend that they just don't exist." I think that's a scary place for a lot of people in our position, because it's really easy for them to say, "Okay, well, we're just not going to put the appropriate teams in place because we are going to get in trouble or people are going to look at us funny." We see it as a responsibility and something that we owe attendees to make sure that they're safe.

We put a lot of energy into our attendees' experience, so it's been tremendous working with all the different harm reduction teams we have in place. That's especially true for the Zendo Project since there's benefit not just in handling the negative side of things, but also in being able to educate people and just having people stroll up to your booth. That it's out there and available for people to ask questions is really rewarding, and also incredibly important because, in my experience, many bad drug experiences come down to people who aren't educated about drugs making really poor decisions.

**LP:** Lots of first-time festival-goers.

**DF:** Yes. You know, a lot of attendees are young kids who think a festival is a lawless playground, and whether that's the case or not—and it's usually not—that's the way they are looking at it so they end up putting themselves in compromising positions.

**LP:** One thing that I really have loved about working at Lightning in a Bottle is that there are a ton of people who don't know about the services we offer. Last year especially, I realized, wow, we have the opportunity to educate these people when they're first discovering festival culture.

**DF:** We recognized that very same thing. The crowd was younger last year, and certainly a lot of first timers. We've always been wanting to educate our audience and really make them aware of what to expect and what the expectations are, like the things going on at the festival, where to go and get help, and not to be shy and not to be afraid to ask for help.

**LP:** You really briefly touched on barriers to providing psychedelic harm reduction, such as worrying about liability and about law enforcement being on board. What made the Do LaB step forward and say, "Okay, this is what we want, we are ready?"

**DF:** We've never really been against harm reduction in principle, but it became a practical issue. In one particular venue, we were told there wouldn't be any interference from police, and there was nothing but interference. Our teams didn't feel

supported, and didn't feel like they could do their jobs, because law enforcement was so eager to throw attendees in the back of a police car and drop them in jail or in a hospital where they don't necessarily have a good understanding of what that person may need. So, we just said, "This is what we do and these are situations that we are seeing and this is how we can make them better."

We felt that we were able to bring harm reduction on board because we've been doing this for so many years, and established ourselves as a very responsible and organized company. We're a festival, that when venues, or law enforcement, or medical directors see our track record they can say, "All right, let's see how we can work together." And that has really been a wonderful thing.

In the early years when we were establishing ourselves as a smaller festival in Orange County and Silverado, we had incredibly supportive local fire, sheriff, and health departments. Since we had all of that support and showing in real time that we could handle it when things went wrong, that gave us confidence moving forward. With the exception of one year, we've had a tremendous response from those groups.

**LP:** It sounds like you have really developed the skills to have a good relationship with the local health departments and law enforcement. Do you provide any direct support or other benefits to local communities where Do LaB events take place?

**DF:** Yes, we do. In 2014, a few months prior to Lightning in a Bottle in Bradley, California, we had a town hall meeting and everyone was welcome to come. In that meeting, we got an

opportunity to see who in the community has businesses that we could support, and we were able to redirect a few sizeable contracts to the local community. For example, we were able to get all the wine for the festival from the local community, and all the signage for the festival from the local signage vendor up there. We were able to support a few different nonprofits in the local community, and we continue to. We also have different initiatives at the event to raise money for charitable organizations. So, we definitely try and be part of the community.

This year, we actually built a really awesome outdoor classroom for art education at the local elementary school. It was a fun way for us to give something lasting back to the community. Not just "here's a check" but here is a tangible thing where kids can learn something for many years to come.

**LP:** When you spoke at the Drug Policy Alliance's Reform conference last November in Washington, D.C., you shared a really great example of how police are no longer weirded out by attendees who want to give them a hug at events. What do you think is their perspective on drugs, and are they prioritizing safety?

**DF:** Yes. I personally get to work closely with law enforcement every year. I get to see that they are just like you and me and they are just doing a job. There are always a few people in any group that just kind of blazes their own trail, then you have some individuals that just have a personal stance or belief. Law enforcement, nine times out of ten, are great to work with. I have really fun and light-hearted conversations with these guys and gals, and then when I see them on shift they look like that

*Zendo volunteer training at Lightning in a Bottle in Bradley, California, 2015.*



tough hard-ass because that's their job. They talk to each other about attendees, and the costumes, and about the goofiness and they laugh about it. It is so far from anything that they normally experience in their lives that they are just kind of impressed by it. That doesn't mean they are going to throw on a tutu on the weekends, but we're opening their eyes to a whole new world, which is cool.

When it comes to drugs, in my experience you don't get a lot of law enforcement that want to go out there and crack down on every little thing they see. They want people to be safe. They want people to have a good time when they're at a music festival. If they feel like they need to step in, then they will absolutely step in and that's fine with us. At the end of the day they are providing a tremendous service to us and the attendees, and the better the relationship we have with them the more successful the event is going to be.

**LP:** Do you have any advice for others who are interested in event production and want to implement harm reduction into their event?

**DF:** I would say, talk to the people who have been doing it. A lot of times it's scary for people because of liability, or because of law enforcement, or their venue, or it's just cost-prohibitive—but the reality is, one bad thing can happen and then you're

never doing an event again. The best insurance policy is to make sure you have a safe event. You may not see the value until something goes terribly wrong and you weren't able to deal with it appropriately.



**LP:** Thank you. In closing, is there anything in the 2016 festival season that you're especially excited to share with our readers?

**DF:** I'm most excited about going to Lightning in a Bottle. [laughs] Really, it's all one long crazy season for me, whether it's our events or other people's events whether we're working or just enjoying. The most exciting part is seeing what changed since last year, and what got better, and how did everyone improve? I am excited to see what Woogie Weekend turns into now that we have done it once, and Dirtybird was just such an awesome success and so much fun that I can't wait to see what happens next year. ☺

**Dede Flemming** is a co-founder of The Do LaB and Lightning in a Bottle Arts and Music Festival. While focusing on many of the aspects of the Do LaB's festivals Dede oversees the day to day operations of the company. He can be reached at [info@thedolab.com](mailto:info@thedolab.com).

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## 4 Principles of Psychedelic Harm Reduction



### Safe space

If someone is having a challenging experience try to move them into a comfortable, warm, and calm environment.



### Talk through, not down

Without distracting from the experience, help the person connect with what they are feeling.



### Sitting, not guiding

Be a calm meditative presence of acceptance, compassion, and caring. Promote feelings of trust and security. Let the person's unfolding experience be the guide.



### Difficult is not bad

Challenging experiences can wind up being our most valuable, and may lead to learning and growth.

