

# The Zendo Project: Evolving Psychedelic Support Since 2012

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*Ryan Beauregard*

## A HISTORY BEYOND THE ZENDO PROJECT

DURING THE ZENDO PROJECT'S PSYCHEDELIC HARM REDUCTION workshop at the Psychedelic Science 2017 Conference, I got to watch one of my elders and heroines share about the evolution of psychedelic support services since the 1960s. Annie Oak delivered a top-notch summary of the groups and leaders who have been present since this movement began. I highly recommend watching her talk, as part of the collection of videos from the conference available online ([psychedelicsscience.org/videos](http://psychedelicsscience.org/videos)). Her recollection of this history has inspired me to share my perspective of the evolution of the Zendo Project since my involvement in 2013.

## ABOUT THE ZENDO PROJECT

Creating a Community of Compassionate Care: The Zendo Project, started in 2012, is a psychedelic harm reduction community outreach program which provides tranquil spaces at events with trained volunteers to help those having a difficult psychedelic experience. Our goal is to help transform those experiences into ones that can offer valuable learning opportunities, and potentially even healing and growth.

## FROM JUVENILE JANITORS TO COSMIC CUSTODIANS

In its infancy, the Zendo Project struggled to provide the staffing numbers to properly support an event. Whether it was having a limited number qualified volunteers or a lack of justification

from the event's production team, we were often understaffed and under-resourced. In these earlier years, some medical and event security personnel saw us as an unnecessary part of event production. But as we continued to transform seemingly impossible situations into positive outcomes before the eyes of safety teams and production managers, our value was increasingly acknowledged and our reputation grew.

We have come to take pride in being what I sometimes call the cosmic custodians of the psychedelic festival scene. We exist to clean-up and care-take the resulting accidents that can occur when sleep deprivation, mental anguish, and trauma meet psychedelics. We have brought together a team that provides grounded, loving support for those facing the most unpleasant, challenging trips of their life.

Our veteran volunteers and staff who provide the Zendo Project's service are not here on a whim, not simply curious about the work. We're all extremely committed to the movement of psychedelic support. Over the last five years, I've seen us grow from a handful of volunteers and three annual events to a tribe of diverse and dedicated individuals giving our all, to ten distinct music and art gatherings in 2017.

## OVER FOUR THOUSAND SUPPORTED

Our first year at Burning Man, in 2012, the Zendo Project supported over 100 guests. In 2013, we made our debut at Envision (Costa Rica), AfrikaBurn (South Africa), and Lightning in a Bottle (California). During those early years, our personnel was minimal, sometimes only two to four people at an event work-

ing around the clock. Some of our spaces in those days consisted of a three-person tent, or a leaky tropical lean-to with sarongs as makeshift walls. Fractal Planet, the art and music camp where we'd been based at Burning Man in 2012 and 2013, didn't return in 2014, and we made home with the camp organized by Dr. Bronner's, the international fair-trade soap and body products company (Dr. Bronner's has been a major supporter of MAPS and the Zendo Project, and their CEO, David Bronner, serves on the MAPS Board of Directors). Our 2014 location was almost hidden in comparison to our front-and-center presence at the previous year's sound camp, yet we still supported about 60 guests.

In 2015, we made the choice to set up and staff two locations at Burning Man, on opposite sides of the city, near what are called the 3:00 and 9:00 keyholes. We had a similar setup again in 2016, and in 2017 chose to consolidate our services to one location. This decision came with the support and suggestions of Burning Man's official Black Rock Rangers and Emergency Service Department, as well as the Burning Man organization, recognizing the value of our services in Black Rock City and wanting to utilize our support within their existing safety framework. From my perspective, this integration and appreciation came as a result of our longstanding relationship with the Burning Man organization, and our ongoing work at outside events where we continued to grow our cooperation and deepen our relationships with medics and security personnel.

From 2013–2016, our presence at AfrikaBurn (South Africa's regional Burning Man event) was focused on assisting the AfrikaBurn Rangers to set up and run their own sanctuary—a safe place for folks to land who need extra care and support in the middle of their psychedelic or psychological challenges. In 2015, Sara Gael, Brooke Balliett, and myself had the honor of connecting deeply with the international exchange program of AfrikaBurn rangers from the U.S. We had all interacted with one another over the course of the years on different Zendo Project calls or drop-offs, but for me, it was this experience that cemented our connection, deepening our relationship with the AfrikaBurn safety team. In my experience with sports teams, corporations, and non-profits, nothing creates cohesion in a team more than spending a week camping, eating, working, and playing together.

Since 2016, we've been increasing our presence at the events we attend, as well as forging new partnerships. In 2016, The same year, we began a partnership with the Drug Policy Alliance (DPA), providing peer support with one of the biggest production companies on the planet—Insomniac—best-known for their three-night 120,000+ person rave in Las Vegas known as the Electric Daisy Carnival (EDC). Since our first appearance at EDC 2016, where we successfully provided education at a multidisciplinary harm reduction booth, we subsequently began providing support services at a handful of other Insomniac

events. Since then, the Zendo Project has also helped with Project #OpenTalk at eight Insomniac events. The goal of Project #OpenTalk, a collaborative initiative developed by Insomniac in collaboration with the Zendo Project, DPA, and Healthy Nightlife, is “connecting accurate and unbiased drug and sexual health information with crucial emotional support provided by trained peers together under one umbrella” ([insomniac.com](http://insomniac.com)).

From there, our involvement with Project #OpenTalk and Insomniac has grown to attending about half of the events they produce, and training their onsite “Ground Control” harm reduction staff in our model.

In 2017, thanks to our deepening relationships with event producers and expanded resources thanks to a successful crowdfunding campaign, we expanded even more. The Zendo Project's presence at Lightning in a Bottle increased from one location to two distinct locations. Last year, the Zendo Project supported over 1,500 people at seven events, including over 670 guests at Burning Man 2017, and over 250 at Lightning in a Bottle.



## TRAININGS AND WORKSHOPS

In the last year, we've done six trainings outside of the festival circuit, including four private events, and two public workshops that provided Continuing Education credits. Our audience is no longer just festival-goers, but a diverse collection of business professionals, doctors, nurses, therapists, entrepreneurs, and event producers. Our last training in Washington, D.C., sold out, and still some people drove from over five hours away for the four-hour, standing-room-only training. Our services are greatly needed at festivals, so we have a constant stream of requests to attend events and train small organizations on how to provide their own version of psychedelic peer support services to their community. We continue to provide outreach, consultation, and resources to these individuals and groups.

These trainings have even extended to law enforcement. In 2016, Sara Gael gave a private informational session federal Bureau of Land Management Rangers at Burning Man. The overwhelming feedback after the training and throughout the event were of appreciation for the service we provide at the event.

As 2018 unfolds, we'll be holding a training specifically for emergency workers, and plan on delivering more trainings specifically for medical professionals and law enforcement personnel, to help those on the front lines provide more compassionate support to those in difficult psychedelic states. We'll also be making online trainings and psychedelic peer support certifications available to the public by the fall of 2018.

## THE ZENDO PROJECT'S REPUTATION

Over the past three years, I've heard our name being used in the same way that Band-Aid™ or Kleenex™ is applied to their equivalent generic products. I get reports from festival-goers

about how thankful they were to have the Zendo Project at events we didn't attend, and have heard our name used as a verb in a forecast of a big night: "This acid is so strong, I'm going to get Zendo'ed!"

There is a question often posed to me by opponents of our work, as well as by curious devil's advocates: "Do you think the presence of the Zendo Project creates a safety net that encourages more irresponsible psychedelic use?" My response is, well, perhaps in the same way that the availability of emergency rooms may prompt some people not to wear their seatbelt, or to be careless with kitchen knives. While we're aware of this critique of safety nets in general, in the conversations we've had with the public, we've found that the Zendo Project is more likely to remind people to stay within certain boundaries than to encourage them to take larger doses of psychedelics—most would rather be out having fun with their friends than being cared for by us.

Often, as party-goers pass by our tent or structure on their way to the big stage, groups will yell out, "We love you, Zendo!" and our unprompted volunteers at the greeter table will respond, "We love you, too!" Sometimes a friend or two will break off from the group and come to thank us for what we did for them or for their friend last night, or last year. Other times, the arrival of a high-energy and/or extremely disoriented guest brought in by medical or security staff helps remind passing groups of what can go wrong if the party gets too intense.

## OUR TAGLINE

From the beginning, some within the community have been opposed to using the words "harm reduction." Over the past few years we've adopted the phrase "psychedelic peer support" to more accurately encapsulate the specific service that we're bringing to the community. Harm reduction as a practice involves such a wide range of services—including drug testing, drug education, and preventative measures—and the reality of our work is that we're dealing with individuals deep within their experiences and in need of immediate assistance from compassionate people in their own community.

## ZENDO PROJECT AS A MOVEMENT

From our humble beginnings at Burning Man in 2012, to our integrated services with medical staff and Black Rock Rangers at Burning Man 2017, with our flyer being given out to every single one of the event's 70,000 attendees, we have seen our vision coming true. This encouragement of having been embraced by the public and event producers alike keeps us focused on continuing to provide these services to a larger and larger community.

Since the beginning, one of the biggest tragedies we've sometimes faced is having to pack up and remove our structure, staff, and support at the end of an event, while a guest is still needing care. We are acutely aware of the current lack of short- and long-term care for individuals facing psychotic breaks or spiritual awakenings who could greatly benefit from new approaches other than what pharmaceutical drugs and psychiatric wards can provide. As the Zendo Project expands, we're brainstorming, seeking creative paths, and making plans for providing more permanent spaces for people who need our care outside of festivals.

As new chapters unfold for the Zendo Project, and for the broader field of psychedelic harm reduction, we face new opportunities for growth, both as individuals and as an organization. We are continuing to streamline our logistics and operations so that the

majority of our time and resources can be focused on what we are most passionate about in this work: being present, learning and improving in real time, and providing support simply by being grounded and compassionate when people are in crisis.

Although being at the bottom of the drain pipes can be hectic and chaotic work, those of us who find a home here are seemingly wired to be sustained by it. To use a metaphor from sustainable design science, the Zendo Project is taking on the psychological waste and emotional discard of our culture, and performing the service of composting it into rich, nutritious soil, so that something new and beautiful may grow from it to feed our future.

I—and all of us at the Zendo Project—share our deep gratitude for all the volunteers, donors, guests, and allies who have made it possible for us to show up at events all over the world and provide peer support for those in need. Please continue to follow our work and get involved by visiting our website, [zendoproject.org](http://zendoproject.org). I'll see you out there. 🌱

**Ryan Beauregard** received his B.A. in Psychology from Claremont McKenna College, and spent 10 years mentoring at-risk teens and families through wilderness survival skills and nature connection. His passion for community connection, the environment, and intrapersonal healing continued with his involvement in permaculture, natural building, and ancestral grief rituals. As a volunteer with the Zendo Project since 2013, Ryan has had the opportunity to connect and expand the scope of psychedelic harm reduction in communities and festivals all over the globe. As the Zendo Project Manager, he integrates his skills in psychology, design and and community engagement. He can be reached at [ryan@maps.org](mailto:ryan@maps.org).

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