

# today's local news

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## Dr. Bronner's Magic Soap

Life philosophy still rests on soap bottles.

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ESCONDIDO – Thirty thousand words of small, cryptic text referencing everything from Thomas Paine to ancient Jewish sages. It isn't the sort of message you would find drafted in a marketing focus group. But for Escondido-based Dr. Bronner's Magic Soap, quirkiness has always been the key ingredient to success.

Suds have been in the Bronner family for five generations. The company that espouses, "Absolute cleanliness is Godliness" is not likely to dry up anytime soon. Dr. Bronner's is poised to surpass \$10 million in revenue for the first time this year – despite profit-sharing policies, charitable contributions and an idealistic vision that would send most corporate executives fleeing.

The "Heilbronner's" soap-making tradition evolved into "Dr. Bronner's Magic Soap" when a young Emanuel Heilbronner (a.k.a. "Dr. Bronner") immigrated to America in 1929.

Emanuel found work as a chemist, married and had three children. But increasingly, he devoted his attention to the individual philosophy he would later publish on soap labels. Dr. Bronner's philosophy is too idiosyncratic to paraphrase, but loosely



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**Michael Bronner, Chief Operating Officer of Dr. Bronner's Magic Soaps, talks to a reporter next to large containers of soap.**

speaking it revolved around the idea that people of all nationalities and religions should unite before God and focus on developing common ground and shared traditions.

He found followers, though not always the kind of followers you want. In 1945, a Chicago man crucified himself to draw attention to Emanuel's ideas (the man survived). After a subsequent disturbance at a University of Chicago dean's office, the future entrepreneur was taken away in a straightjacket and placed in Elgin State Mental Hospital. After several failed escapes, he made his way to Los Angeles, where he

was unknown, and rented an apartment in a tenement building.

Today's international company had its humble origins in there, where he would mix 20-gallon drums of soap with a broom handle and peddle it door to door. But for the "Pope of Soap", soap making was always as much about the message as the medium.

Originally, Bronner would preach his ideas on street corners, giving soap to anyone who would listen.

The good "doctor," who held no formal doctorate, soon discovered people were making off with the soap without sticking around for the ser-

mon. "So he got the idea to put the philosophy on every bar of soap," said Michael Bronner, Emanuel's grandson.

This began a life's quest to formulate his philosophy into a message that could fit on a soap label. That philosophy is still found on every bottle of Dr. Bronner's Magic Soap, beginning with the lines, "Absolute cleanliness is Godliness! Then, who else but God gave man Love that can spark mere dust to life! The moral ABC, uniting All-One, brave, all life! Who else but God! Who else!"

"He took what he loved from the world's religions and he forgot the rest," said Ralph Bronner, Emanuel's son, who lives in Milwaukee and travels across the country promoting the Bronner's brand.

Emanuel's first few years as a self-employed soap maker were hard, family members said. Then the 60's came along and hippies embraced everything about Dr. Bronner's soap, from its new age philosophy to its all-purpose 18-in-1 formula.

According to its label, Dr. Bronner's soap can be used to shave, shampoo, massage, brush teeth or wipe a baby's bottom. It is also biodegradable, which makes it a popular option for environmentally conscious campers.

In 1961, Bronner fled the smog of Los Angeles for Escondido. The brand blossomed into a success, written about in *Vogue*, *Seventeen*, *Glamour*, *Shape* and many other magazines.

Emanuel became a '60's icon and was featured in a Jimi Hendrix film, "Rainbow Bridge."

In his later years, Emanuel went blind and would speak his ideas into a tape recorder for transcription. Ralph recalls his father talking into the tape recorder until 2 in the morning, fretting over the minutest phrasing on the label. Ralph would then

have to retype the label with the new message intact.

Today, the family is run by Emanuel's descendants, including Michael, Ralph, daughter-in-law Trudy, and grandson David, who serves as chief executive officer.

David Bronner is very active in the effort to legalize industrial hemp in the U.S., and hemp oils have been added to Dr. Bronner's magic mix of ingredients. Beyond idealism, the hemp oils serve a practical purpose: providing another natural ingredient for the Bronner soap recipe, which doesn't use any chemicals or animal byproducts.

Ralph Bronner, Vice President, works to keep the company's more eclectic traditions alive and is the spokesperson and story teller. "My motto is if it breathes it needs soap, and that includes dogs," Ralph said.

He loves to regale audiences with stories about the impact Dr. Bronner's Magic Soap has had on people. The company received a letter from one person who had been "planning his demise" in the bathroom when he stumbled across the soap label before him, Ralph said.

Another letter came from a Peace Corps volunteer in a remote section of Mongolia, praising the soap, especially its naturalness.

Dr. Bronner's products are produced by a company with only around 20 employees, Michael said.

Liquid soap comes into Escondido on milk trucks from Los Angeles and is stored in 6,500-gallon tanks before being packaged in individual bottles. Bars are produced in Tennessee.

Dr. Bronner's product lines include liquid castile soap, detergents and bar soap.

In partnership with Gertrude Spindler, it also produces "Gertrude and Bronner's Magic Alpsnack," a line of snack bars made with hemp

nuts and other natural ingredients.

In April, Dr. Bronner's plans to expand its merchandise list to include organic lip balms, Michael said.

Each of the company's employees garner a minimum salary of \$42,000, a year including an end-of-the-year profit sharing bonus, ranging from \$15,000 to \$60,000, Ralph said. A majority of the company's profits are donated to charity, Ralph and Michael said. Several years ago, the company donated a 1,200 acre rainforest to the Boys and Girls Clubs of America. The company also donates to charities everywhere from Ghana to China.

The soap is more popular than ever – if a bit conspicuous when stacked next to its competitors on the soap racks, with their flower emblems and sleek bottles.

"You can eat this stuff. You can wash your hair with it. You can wash your cars with it," said David Jackson, an assistant store manager at Jimbo's in Escondido.

Well maybe eating too much of the soap isn't the best idea. The soap labels advises, "Don't Drink Soap! Dilute! Dilute!"

But for many different types of usages, Dr. Bronner's remains a favorite option at health stores.

"We sell tons of it," said Selina Reddan, a vitamin specialist at Jimbo's in Escondido. "We sell more of this than any other soap."

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