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Ralph Bronner of Milwaukee sits among the Echoes of Peace Choir members Tuesday night, enjoying a few songs at Peace United Church of Christ. "It's beautiful," Bronner said. Bronner, whose father started Dr. Bronner's Magic Soap Co., travels the country advocating peace and helping others. At Bronner's right is Rita Bergstedt of Duluth.

Soap heir peddles peace, love

A chance meeting
through music leads
to a tour of Duluth

by the maker
Dr. Bronner's soap

Ralph Bronner doesn't need to drive around the country in his minivan with boxes of his family's famous soap. But it is a great way to meet people.

And so there he was Tuesday, vice president of Dr. Bronner's Magic Soap Co., in Duluth, Minnesota, to sing children's songs and eat a potluck dinner in the basement of Peace United Church of Christ.

All in the name of peace and love.

It's a message he passes out with songs, hugs, laughter and bottles of soap to charities and people around the world. Often, there are hefty checks to go along.

Bronner and his wife, Gisela, drove the minivan to Duluth this week to meet his new favorite folk singer, the Twin Port's Sara Thomsen, and the Echoes of Peace Choir that she directs.

Bronner first heard Thomsen on a CD sampler of 22 up-and-coming folk artists. But it was Thomsen's single "Is It For Freedom?" on the war in Iraq that caught his ear



Sara Thomsen, director of Echoes of Peace Choir, leads the choir Tuesday night in a verse of "Siyahamba," a South African song that roughly translates to, "we are marching in the light of truth." The choir met at Peace United Church of Christ for a potluck dinner and practice, and to meet Ralph Bronner, who came to meet the group after hearing its CD.

most.

"I've loved folk music since the '50's. I've known Pete Seger, Arlo Guthrie, James Taylor..." Bronner said. "But Sara is just fantastic...Her one fault is that she is too modest. The whole world should hear her."

The two have conversed by phone and mail for more than a year—Bronner ordering more of Thomsen's CD's and Thomsen listening to Bronner's tales of world travels in the name of charities and organic soap.

"The phone calls could get pretty long. But he's an incredible person," Thomsen said. "I'd heard of the soap before. I buy it at the Whole Foods Co-Op. But I didn't know who he was or the work his family has done."

When Thomsen also sent Bronner a CD of the Echoes of Peace Choir, he was so impressed that he ordered more of their CD's— and he sent the whole choir boxes of soap.

"The quality of this choir is unbelievable," he said Tuesday. "And their message, it's a message of peace and brotherhood. I had to come and meet them."

A native of the Milwaukee area who has lived there most of his 69 years, Ralph Bronner spent much of his professional life teaching troubled, big-city junior high students.

But he was drawn back to his father's soap business and now is the goodwill ambassador of the company that remains family-owned. He still drives thousands of miles every year to visit stores that sell the soap, but only to talk, never to try to pitch

the product.

"It sells itself. We don't do any marketing." He noted.

Ralph's father, Emanuel Bronner, who died in 1997, was a third-generation German soap-maker from an Orthodox Jewish family, but rebelled against his father and came to the United States in the late 1920's. Most of the family he left behind died in the holocaust.

After a strange route that included a stint in an Illinois insane asylum, Emanuel Bronner literally escaped to California and started the company that is famous today among people who look for organic, eco-friendly and socially responsible products.

Ralph Bronner now preaches three key ingredients of his eccentric father's stalwart philosophy - "constructive capitalism," "spaceship Earth" and "All One Good Faith" that buyers of the soaps may recognize from the labels, some of which have more than 3,000 words crammed onto a quart bottle.

Ralph once thought that those words were his father's ridiculous ramblings. Now, he understands.

The constructive capitalism part means the family charges a fair price for a good product, pays better than fair wages and benefits to its workers and won't sell the company to corporate America. It also means much of the company's profits go back into society.

"It's an 11\$ million company that sells five-and-a-half million bottles of soap a year and gives 30 to 70 per-

cent of it's profits to charities," Bronner rattles off. It's not bragging, its fact, and Bronner is the company's chief philanthropist.

"All One Good Faith isn't just on Bronner's minivan's license plates, it's a philosophy of world harmony that contends we are all united by one God, no matter our race or religion.

"His message is the same as ours," Thomsen told her choir when introducing Bronner. "Only it's a different vehicle."

Soap instead of sopranos.

"God bless you all," Bronner said after Tuesday's night's sing-a-long. "And keep singing."

Bronner also visited the Whole Foods Co-Op and Harbor City International School on Tuesday. Today, Bronner is scheduled to visit Grant Elementary and the Summit School in Duluth as well as the Loaves and Fishes Catholic Worker community and Temple Israel.

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Ralph Bronner

Dr. Bronner's Magic Soaps

P.O. Box 28
Escondido, CA 92033
(760) 743-2211
(760) 745-6675 Fax
www.drbronner.com

Ralph Bronner

W172 N9335 Shady Lane
Menomonee Falls, WI 53051
(262) 255-5511
(262) 257-0414 Fax

Sara Thomsen

6476 South Range Line Rd
South Range, WI 54874
www.sarathomsen.com