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From the Portland Business Journal:

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Psychedelic Oregon: Meet nine psilocybin trailblazers

Jun 20, 2023, 11:58am PDT



Sam Gehrke

Mike Arnold is planning to create a psilocybin retreat center at the former Laurelwood campus in Gaston.

Ever since voters passed Measure 109 in 2020, dozens of entrepreneurs have helped shape Oregon's emerging legal psilocybin economy. These are people who see their role in bringing psychedelics to the public not so much as a job but a higher calling. Here are nine early participants who span the gamut from spore to trip.

Retreat center visionary

Mike Arnold has big plans for a former Seventh-day Adventist boarding school in Gaston, Oregon: “the biggest psychedelic retreat center on planet Earth,” he said.

In its heyday, 300 students lived at the Laurelwood Academy, founded in 1904 in the rural Washington County community. Now the 50-acre campus — dorms, a science lab and chapel — sits empty.

“I look at this property as a diamond in the rough,” Arnold said.

Arnold, a trial lawyer based in Eugene, said he has a binding term sheet with a “well financed property developer to create a psychedelic educational institute, one “focused on the mind, body and spirit, the whole person, as opposed to modern medicine of here’s a pill to fix the body.”

See also: How Oregon's psilocybin economy is taking shape

Arnold is no newcomer to the psilocybin retreat space. In 2018, he founded Silo Wellness, which trades on the Canadian Securities Exchange. Silo offers psilocybin micro-dosing retreats in Jamaica from \$4,200 per person.

“In Oregon, I would rather wander in the woods and do mushrooms than come to a center, but this is a way to incorporate all of that, the beauty of nature and the human condition in one place, an hour from the airport and with facilitators,” Arnold said one rainy March afternoon in Laurelwood’s former cafeteria.

Arnold's plan, subject to receiving a service center license, is to start with around a dozen guests and work up to 100 or more. He foresees a lower price point at Laurelwood than Jamaica, "not the luxury retreat model," he said.

"My goal is to get the medicine to people as quickly and inexpensively as possible," he said. "A system like this that's scalable over time is in the best interest of the consumer."

Along with psilocybin the center will offer yoga, meditation and classes on reducing anxiety and cultivating a healthy lifestyle, Arnold said.

"There are best practices — we know them, science and ancient religions know them," Arnold said. "To put them in a place that's accessible to everyone, there's a wonderful opportunity here. Given size and scope of the property, we could be quite the disrupter in reducing costs, so a burgeoning industry in Oregon can be available to a wider swath of people in need."

Silo's website features a sandy beach with chaise lounges, yet 95% of the inquires he gets are about Oregon, Arnold said.

"They want to come somewhere that's regulated and safe," he said. "The Laurelwood center is the best equipped place in Oregon — or maybe on the planet — the right place and the right time, and a lot of good can happen here."

Educator

Eric Zelfand describes herself as a "recovering primary care physician." When she started out in private practice in Beaverton, she was surprised at how many of her patients were struggling with mood and mental health issues.

A naturopath, Zelfand felt she still needed more tools in her kit to heal patients. After attending an ayahuasca circle, during which she saw undulating snakes and rainbow fractals, she started thinking about life from "different angles that were healthier and more honest," she recalled.

"I bolted upright and yelled, in my head, I have to understand the

science of how this is working,” Zelfand said.

Her psychedelic experience led her down a research rabbit hole, and she started speaking at Oregon Psychological Association seminars.

“I came out of the psychedelic closet,” she said. “Where I was expecting to be shamed or to get in trouble professionally, I was shocked at the fact nobody seemed to be upset that I was doing this, but how many folks in the naturopathic and conventional medical communities just wanted to know more. It was very much not the reception I was expecting, but in a very good way.”

She met Tom Eckert, one of the chief sponsors of Measure 109, during the ballot campaign. He later asked her to join InnerTrek, a facilitator training program he founded. The program emphasizes ethics, along with neuroscience and pharmacology.

“We balance the woo and the science very well,” Zelfand said.

As she sees it, facilitator training ensures the safety of a psilocybin trip.

“There are a lot of people who work now in the underground, and some are phenomenal,” Zelfand said. “Some are yahoos and, frankly, dangerous. What we are ensuring by training these students is that they’re going to be ethical, solid and competent facilitators.”

Manufacturer

Fresh off of receiving Oregon’s first psilocybin manufacturing license in mid-March, Tori Armbrust said her goal was to grow “the cleanest, best medicine and offering it to people who need it.”

Three months later, Armbrust was feeling frustrated. The state had licensed just three psilocybin service centers as of mid-June and none had yet opened, so demand for mushrooms was almost nonexistent.

“Things are moving along, but at a glacial speed,” said Armbrust, who owns Satori Farms PDX. “I’ve stockpiled product and there’s

nobody to get it to.”

Armbrust, who comes to psilocybin with a background in teaching gourmet mushroom cultivation, adapted her Southeast Portland production space for making psilocybin.

Whether she’s moving shrooms or not, Armbrust has to sock away \$880 a month for next year’s \$10,000 license renewal fee, not to mention covering her \$1,000 rent and her insurance and utilities.

“The only way this works is for people who have a lot of money to bankroll this until it’s all up and operating,” Armbrust said. “It’s not happening and it needs to happen quicker, especially if the smaller guys are going to stay in business.”

Tester

Dan Huson, who owns Rose City Laboratories, knew as soon as psilocybin became legal in Oregon that he would get involved.

“I’m a natural forager and I love natural medicines,” he said.

Rose City is the first and only certified and licensed lab in the state to test psilocybin to make sure it’s the right species — *psilocybe cubensis*. The lab also tests the strains for potency.

Adapting Rose City’s cannabis equipment for psilocybin was pretty straightforward.

“We already have the equipment, the knowhow and the personnel,” Huson said.

Rose City has so far tested eight batches of psilocybin. Huson doesn’t anticipate a flood of business in the first 12 months, since a single batch can take a service center two months or longer to work through.

He estimates he’s invested \$80,000 on the psilocybin R&D, equipment change-over and licensing fees, an amount that may take about four years to get back.

It’s not all about the money, though.

After surviving cancer, Huson started a marijuana dispensary in

2011, so he could start “growing for other patients who were sick and dying.” He was convinced he’d be arrested in six months but was willing to take the risk “because of the healing properties of cannabis,” he said.

“I believe in the healing powers of fungi, especially psilocybin,” he said. “I never really considered myself an activist, but doing what is right, but I guess I sort of am an activist.”

Funder

Dr. Bronner’s, the top-selling natural soap maker in North America, had a bumper year in 2020.

“Our business model is we give all our profits to causes and charities, and the soap business in 2020 was ridiculous,” said David Bronner, the company’s Cosmic Engagement Officer and grandson of the founder of the family-owned business based in the San Diego area.

Bronner used some of that largesse to help make psilocybin legalization a reality in Oregon, donating more than \$1 million in corporate profits to the Measure 109 signature drive and campaign.

Since then, Dr. Bronner’s has given \$100,000 a year to the Healing Advocacy Fund, which does advocacy and education around psilocybin in Oregon and Colorado, and has supported two facilitator training programs with loans and grants, Bronner said.

“I’ve experienced in my own life and seen a whole lot of family and friends benefit from the healing power these medicines have,” he said. “Not that I’m opposed to taking it in nature, but to get the real healing power that is possible, you need a program like what Oregon is doing. Everybody can benefit. We’re all struggling in life with problems, even if we don’t have a formal diagnosis.”

Bronner is supporting the current legislative push in California for a measure similar to Oregon’s.

"This is a national effort, a global effort," he said.

Advocate

As director of the nonprofit Healing Advocacy Fund, Sam Chapman has kept close tabs on the rollout of Oregon's psilocybin program, from identifying problems with the state's proposed rules to tracking all the cities and counties with "opt out" measures on their ballots last year.

"My closet has no shortage of hats," said Chapman, who served as the Measure 109 campaign manager. "A big part of the job is staying focused on things we can control and support and being incredibly nimble and humble when new issues come up."

Chapman focus' is on education, advocacy and fundraising. Healing Advocacy has raised \$150,000 to provide fellowships for facilitator training for those from diverse backgrounds.

"One thing we're serious about, if we talk about equity, is to put our money where our mouth is," he said.

Chapman also supported a controversial bill this session that will require service centers to collect and aggregate data for research purposes. He argued the bill would enhance the program's safety and provide metrics that the insurance industry needs to assess the viability of providing coverage. But many in the psilocybin community opposed the bill as an invasion of privacy and an administrative burden. Gov. Tina Kotek SB 303 into law in early June.

Chapman said he expects he'll be doing more outreach and education as temporary moratoriums on psilocybin in counties around the state start to expire.

"We're going to start to see a new wave of advocates pick up the ball where we left off a year ago, and that's what makes me excited for access in rural communities in Oregon, which did not happen in first round," he said.

Service Center operator

Heidi Venture had for years dealt with treatment-resistant

depression. She had weaned herself off of antidepressants and was managing the condition with therapy, a light visor and earbuds that shoot light to the brain.

Then she met John Nelson, who had just read Michael Pollan's "How to Change your Mind." For their first date, they took some psilocybin pills. She tried a larger dose in March 2020.

"I laughed for two hours straight and turned into a sweet, happy honeybee when I came out and my depression was substantially gone," Venture said.

Now the pair are opening a psilocybin service center in Hood River called Vital Reset. Venture completed her facilitator training with the Synaptic Institute in Portland and anticipates receiving her facilitator and service center licenses any day and to open in mid-July. Already, 120 people are on the waiting list, many of them retirees.

Getting to this point took about a year. Venture and Nelson scoured Hood River for an appropriate space to rent, finally landing in a commercial building that also houses a cannabis shop. They added a bathroom, replaced the wiring, painted every surface, installed new carpet and purchased a 375-pound safe to store product. They've adorned the walls with works from local artists and picked a nature theme and spiritual imagery for two of the rooms.

They hope to recoup their startup costs of about \$120,000 in the first year. That means charging about \$3,000 or more for an individual psilocybin session, in line with other centers.

"I've done important things, but nothing with the scale and potential of what psychedelics can do for people," she said.

Facilitator

Henry Fields, a yogi, meditation coach and self-described spiritual seeker, got into psychedelics, Timothy Leary, the Grateful Dead and counterculture at a young age, he said. That led him to eastern religions and philosophy. He's taken a shamanic practitioner course and studied hypnosis.

Now he's poised to become a psilocybin facilitator. Fields was among the first 100 graduates of InnerTrek's training program, which he likened to "Harry Potter discovering there's a Hogwarts." He held off on applying for his license right away to first make sure he'd find work. He was in discussions with several service centers in June and hopes to work up to three or four psilocybin sessions per week.

"I now have enough evidence it's worth it for me to get a license," Fields said. "I was waiting to see the terrain. There's going to be a lot of growing pains associated with it, but it's something I still strongly believe in and want to do."

Architects

Tom Eckert and his late wife Sheri Eckert got psilocybin on the Oregon ballot.

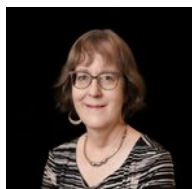
The couple, who had a private therapy practice in Portland, were the co-chief petitioners for the initiative.

Sheri passed away just weeks after voters passed Measure 109 by a sound majority. Tom Eckert has stayed involved in the cause. For a time, he served as the first chairman of the state's Psilocybin Advisory Board before resigning in March 2022.

He founded the Sheri Eckert Foundation, which has raised \$139,000 to fund grants for facilitator training. And he formed InnerTrek, a training program for psilocybin facilitators that plans to soon add a service center.

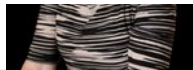
InnerTrek recently leased the top floor of Portland's colorful Fair-Haired Dumbbell building on MLK Boulevard and will hold group ceremonies to keep costs down.

"We're interested in making the process efficient and safe and high-quality," Eckert said. "We think we can make an impact with the community."



Elizabeth Hayes

Staff Reporter - *Portland Business Journal*



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