



Our Hen House

CHANGE THE WORLD FOR ANIMALS

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Interview with David Bronner

By OUR HEN HOUSE

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*Following is a transcript of an interview with **DAVID BRONNER** conducted by **JASMIN SINGER** and **MARIANN SULLIVAN** of [Our Hen House](#), for the [Our Hen House podcast](#). The interview aired on Episode 240.*

JASMIN: David Bronner is president of Dr. Bronner's Magic Soaps, the top selling brand of natural soaps in North America. He is grandson of company founder Emanuel Bronner and a fifth generation soap maker. Under David and his brother Michael's leadership the brand has grown from 4 million dollars in annual revenue in 1998 to over 65 million dollars in annual revenue in 2013. David and Michael established Dr. Bronner's as a trendsetter in the organic body care industry by becoming one of the first brands to certify its soaps, lotions, and balms under the USDA National Organic Program in 2003, marking the beginning of Dr. Bronner's Magic Soaps' issue-oriented activism in the natural products marketplace. David dedicates time and resources to many different issues on behalf of the company's mission, which encompasses commitments to making socially and environmentally responsible products of the highest quality and to dedicating profits to help make the world a better place. David was born in Los Angeles in 1973 and earned an undergraduate degree in biology from Harvard University. He lives in California with his wife Kris and their daughter Maya and he is a dedicated vegan who enjoys dancing late into the night. You could learn more at [drbronner.com](#).

Welcome to Our Hen House, David.

DAVID: Thanks for having me.

JASMIN: We are so excited to have you. I feel like we're really talking to someone who we know so intimately well by way of the products that you offer that are just all over our apartment and so many people we know.

MARIANN: And have been for as long as I can remember, just, it really goes back.

JASMIN: Yeah, absolutely. And everybody knows Dr. Bronner's of course but not everyone knows its history. Can you give us a glimpse into how the company started?

DAVID: My granddad, Dr. Bronner, was himself a third-generation master soap maker from an Orthodox Jewish family in southern Germany. The family had started first manufacturing soap in 1858. By the time my granddad was born in 1908, the family company had become quite successful and had three factories, the largest of which was in Heilbronn. And my granddad was an apprentice to the kind of guild system of the time and became a master soap maker, went to school and got an equivalent of a Master's in chemistry and was

working for his dad and uncles in his young 20s but was repeatedly clashing with them. He was very into the Zionist movement and was kinda rocking the boat politically. His dad and uncles were a little more assimilationist, and then just probably more he was just really strong headed and had a lot of newfangled ideas on how to make soap and was repeatedly clashing with his dad and uncles, and so left to the States in the late '20s and became a consultant to the soap industry here. And with the rise of Nazism, you were increasingly alarmed and he tried to get his parents out and his sisters out. They refused to go. Two of his youngest sisters got out, one went to what's now the Ein Gev kibbutz in Israel and another came here to Boston. But the parents didn't leave in time and the Nazis nationalized the factory in 1940 and gassed my granddad's parents along with his extended family soon thereafter.

And out of the just trauma and tragedy of that experience -- plus my granddad had married a kinda sickly woman who died early in my dad's life, so a lot of tragedy hit my granddad. And he felt that in the shadow of the Holocaust and with nuclear annihilation imminent, that if we didn't realize our transcendent unity across religious and ethnic divides, that we were gonna perish and kill ourselves. And he called this kinda insight, he called that the All-One-God-Faith and was promulgating that around the country and basically putting my dad and uncle in foster homes to be raised while he went around kind of saving the world while selling his family's natural soap on the side, which was far and away the best soap on the market. And that's another point, is that better living through chemistry in the post-World War II era was taking off across the board in all kinds of industries basically moving to petrochemical feedstocks and away from renewable.

MARIANN: So Dr. Bronner's soap is really the original soap from back in your old family, just it was the way he marketed it that it changed. I feel like Dr. Bronner's really started to take off in '70s, is that right?

DAVID: Yeah, in the '60s and '70s. When people -- he had a kind of small loyal following what with the counterculture and the widespread rejection of faceless corporate America and the war machine. The soap became kind of the iconic product of the era.

MARIANN: Yeah, absolutely. And all of the messaging, which I guess came from all of this pain that your grandfather had gone through, kind of appealed to people in that era. And yet this is a product from the counterculture era that kind of stuck around whereas most of them didn't. How do you account for that?

DAVID: Well, I think number one it's like the best soap. I mean, it's really high quality soap, and most so-called liquid soaps on the shelves are actually not true soap. They're actually detergent products. They have a very different skin feel and just kinda lather characteristic. And the one big advantage when you formulate with these detergents is you can thicken products up at a low concentration and kinda make the appearance of a concentrated product. But with my granddad's soap it's very difficult to thicken up, so we're at like 40% concentrate, which is like two to three times more concentrated than anything else on the shelves. So the amount of value you get when you buy my granddad's soap is just amazing. And then as well the ecological footprint is extremely low compared to comparable products. You can basically bathe by the stream or by the river and not worry about if the soap rapidly biodegrades, and its manufacture is super simple. It's a simple one-step reaction process made in the same way soap's been made for millennia. So I think that just the environmental ethos and just other progressive streams that came out of the

counterculture carried the soap through the '70s and '80s and into the '90s when the whole kinda health and lifestyle, healthy lifestyle movement, really started to merge and go mainstream.

MARIANN: Well, I'm so glad the soap stuck around because we love it and I think everybody loves it. And it smells so good. All of the scents are so good. But you've actually expanded way beyond... do you call it Magic Soap? Is that the traditional name of the product, the Magic Soap?

DAVID: That is our DBA. I guess our corporate name is All-One-God-Faith. But the bar soaps were termed "magic soaps," I think an Esquire article from the early '70s had dubbed them that and my granddad kinda liked it, so kind of like the magical phenomenon of this soap with only word of mouth, no marketing. My granddad was pretty much like, when you didn't want to hear what he had to say, he wouldn't sell to you. He was pretty much the anti-marketer kinda guy. And he thought of what he was doing as a nonprofit religious mission, not as an ethical consumer products company.

JASMIN: Well, yeah. That's one of the reasons why we love it so much. I know you want to carry on the values behind the product, and one of them is about avoiding cruelty to animals. Can you tell us about your stance on cosmetics testing?

DAVID: Yeah. Animals should not be subjected to cosmetic chemicals or be tested on it. Just in the first place, this is for human vanity, animals shouldn't be suffering for what kind of benefit to the human race? It's trivial and about our vanity. And then second of all it's completely unnecessary because we have a huge repertoire or library of studies that have been carried out over time, so it's quite easy to reference safety studies that have been done. And then in the third place there's advanced synthetic membrane technologies that approximate human skin and eye and cornea very well and you can get a read on whether or not a potential chemical will be problematic just through using these new technologies. So it's a completely unnecessary and cruel practice and Europe's banned it and hopefully we will soon as well.

MARIANN: Tell us about the Be Cruelty-Free campaign. I understand you're working with HSUS.

DAVID: Yeah. Okay, yeah, that's right. So yeah, basically taking the same European regulations here, that animal testing is -- I'm thinking our society, we're moving from a place where animals are part of the non-human world and we can do whatever we want to them, to lead to, they have feelings and they suffer and are intelligent and we can't just fuck with them and hurt them. So I think that real progress can be made. I think with the chimpanzees -- you know, finally stopped testing on chimps. So yeah, I think that this is important work that I think can be accomplished, hopefully.

JASMIN: We completely agree and we're just so excited that you're really helping to lead the charge with that. And I know you've also committed to helping out organizations who are working for animals, such as Our Hen House. Thank you very much for that. And can you tell us a little bit about that?

DAVID: Yeah. I'm personally vegan. I had some pretty intense psychedelic experiences in the mid '90s and those caused me to question --

JASMIN: Whoa! Let's talk about those, David.

DAVID: Yeah. Well, I do feel like psychedelics, properly approached and used, are huge allies for us to awaken compassion and awareness just about ourselves and each other and the nonhuman world, that we live within a living world that we take for granted, and just our trashing, our unthinking consumption. Consumption choices on the planet collectively magnified is a disaster. And you look at the factory farms and just how horrible they are on so many different levels. And just by making simple consumption decisions we can start to shift these realities to a more compassionate dietary flow and a more sustainable economy.

MARIANN: But you're also putting some money behind that commitment, aren't you?

DAVID: Yeah, absolutely. And I would just say that psychedelics are not a panacea. Many people don't seem to have any breakthroughs in this area. But for me it was just like, it collapses the distance between what you're doing immediately and the ultimate kind of what's going on out there that's making that product or service happen. And like, you're holding a knife and are you gonna kill a cow or are you gonna chop down some vegetables? And it's just like, yeah, okay, I could stick a knife in a cow, but that's not cool, I'm not gonna do it anymore. So I think that there is -- whatever. And psychedelics are important for a lot of reasons like that.

Anyways, some of the concrete steps we're taking is we really like Compassion Over Killing's Meatless Monday. I think that program's a very smart one because you're getting into the schools that kids are at an impressionable age and they're not stuck in their ways, and proving that everyone can be vegetarian for a day and your bones didn't break and all the other stupid myths that attend vegetarianism and vegetarian choice, the fact that it's -- well, it also helps normalize vegetarian identity, it's not such a weird thing and like a stigma to go around, and it's just less of an issue with your peers which just makes it an easier choice that way. And it's cheaper, so you're saving schools money. So it seems like it's just an easy program to adopt.

JASMIN: We completely agree, and we've had Erica Meier on the podcast before. We love the fact that you're really looking at supporting groups that are working to change the world for animals. And I wish more for-profit companies would do that and would also do so many of the other things that you work on. I know that one of the toughest problems for personal care and food manufacturers who care about doing the right thing is palm oil. Can you tell us about your position on palm oil?

DAVID: Yeah. So palm oil's a real lightning rod for unsustainable agricultural practice. And in particular in Borneo and Indonesia, unsustainable clear-cutting of rainforest to make way for these monocrop palm plantations, it's destroying orangutan habitat, displacing communities, just kind of just really bad across the board. And it's not limited to Indonesia. We see it in West Africa, it's the same things happening. And it's not limited to palm. The rainforest in Brazil and South America is largely being clear-cut for GMO soy to feed animals. And it's not so much what you're growing but how you're growing it, and everything can be grown in a more sustainable versus not sustainable way.

So what we've done is we've identified a really cool project in Ghana. We're working with smallholder farms who have been farming their land for two generations, there's no clear-cutting. There's a lot of biodiversity within the trees, it's not like an entire monocrop. And it's

just a really cool fair trade deal, it's organic, we farm organic, we've brought in an agronomist. We kinda help teach them some good organic practices like being able to plant perimeter plants that pests prefer so you take the pressure off the main crop and just do it without chemicals. And so, yeah, obviously no orangutan habitat was destroyed making this happen. And we definitely have paid a significant premium for it, but we're starting to realize some economies of scale, so over time we feel like we'll get to a more reasonable price point with it. And in a way it's just really important I think both for ourselves and our customers that we are going the extra mile with an ingredient like palm oil. And if you don't know where it's coming from it's probably coming from somewhere bad.

JASMIN: Can we talk about fair trade for a second, what exactly that means and what your commitment is to fair trade?

DAVID: Yeah. So fair trade emerged around the global coffee market. So basically in the '80s, with globalization, the pricing in the global coffee market was extremely volatile and was routinely dropping below the farmers cost of production, who had very little access to what the market was doing. They were being through these kind of coyotes in between them and usurers were kind of basically like loan shark interest rates and just trapping these small farmers in a poverty trap and it was a bad cycle. And so what fair trade basically does is you break through those coyote middlemen and you establish a relationship directly with the farming community that you're gonna do business with. And among other things you work out a floor price so that even if market prices crash below cost of production you guarantee a floor price that has a decent return. And then assuming that you're above market you're still paying a fair trade premium, generally 10%, into a social community fund that is democratically administered by the local stakeholders to fund community development projects like clean water wells and school books for the schools and medical equipment for the hospital, whatever the community decides as a project to fund.

And it's basically kind of acknowledging that when we make stuff here in the developed world, not that our farmers and family farmers don't have a lot of struggles and it's a whole other story, but at least you have basic things like crop insurance and some basic access to healthcare, whereas if multinationals go set up shop in developing countries, they don't got anything. They don't have basic government infrastructure and services. So I think it's important that yeah, it's gonna cost a lot less to do business there, but that's because you're taking advantage of a situation where they're not paying for basic services. So I think fair trade is a way of, one, establishing a long term respectful relationship with your producing partners, and then two, just recognizing that often the governmental services are weak and that you should be paying into some kind of fund that will help kind of the most vulnerable and identify key projects to fund.

MARIANN: Well, it's great to hear that all of the language on those Dr. Bronner bottles that I've been reading all these years, that you're really trying to carry that out and you're really trying to fulfill those goals. And I don't think we've asked you yet. Everybody knows about the soap, the magic soap, and everybody loves it, but you have a lot more products out now. Can you tell us a little bit about your new lines?

DAVID: Yeah. So we actually set up our own fair trade coconut oil facility in Sri Lanka after the tsunami hit and we were involved with a project that was trying to help repair fishing boats and small shops and stuff like that. And one thing led to another and we were like, we had already gone organic but had realized that certified organic in and of itself does not

address the social conditions under which our materials are being produced. For example the migrant labor workforce in California does not get any better wages or working conditions if it's an organic lettuce field or a conventional lettuce field. It's just, the organic regs don't touch that and are not sufficient. So you really have to have that fair trade certification to ensure that.

JASMIN: Yeah, by the way, word to the wise to our listeners, I use that coconut oil as my makeup remover. It's fantastic.

DAVID: Yeah. No, it's the best. And so we ended up just investing in the coconut factory and working with all these small farmers in fair trade terms and produced not only a cosmetic grade coconut oil for soap but also a culinary virgin coconut oil that's like amazing, super tasty and can be used for everything. And so that's really taken off for us. But we've also got stuff like lip balms and lotions and sanitizer spray, and all kinds of this, that and the other thing. But you can check it out on our website, www.drbronner.com.

JASMIN: I know that you've done your share of activism over the years. Can you tell us about why you feel so strongly about hemp and how that relates to your activism?

DAVID: Yeah, so hemp is kind of at the nexus of drug policy and environmental policy. It's a real interesting place. It's like the most ridiculous part of the drug war that keeps a non-drug agricultural crop as a Schedule I substance. And hemp has -- it grows like a weed, it really requires minimal inputs. It lends itself well to organic farming systems compared to something like cotton which takes a huge amount of the world's herbicide, lots of water. So it's a sustainable, renewable crop for clothing and then also for biocomposites and for construction composites and a lot of interesting things. And then again this shows the whole kind of hollow BS that the drug war is built on especially cannabis prohibition. So for us it's just an opportunity of really kinda taking out one of the legs of cannabis prohibition as much as recommercializing a beneficial ecological crop.

JASMIN: Now, I'm completely with you about that and I'm glad you brought that up. I have one final question for you, David. A vegan world: will it happen?

DAVID: Yeah. We'll have to get more psychedelics out there.

JASMIN: We'll start that campaign.

DAVID: But yeah, I think it's gonna in a big way, like the Beyond Meats and all those really interesting products hitting the market. And I think it's gonna get tougher and tougher -- and another goal we have after we get past this whole GMO labeling fight is to be able to mandatorily label densely confined meat versus less densely confined meat versus pasture raised and really force consumers to confront the really bad meat at point of sale and what it costs and do it right, and just hope for, just keep shifting the culture.

JASMIN: Absolutely. Well, I'm so glad you said yes because we're with you. There will be a vegan world. And I think that there is already so much more of a compassionate and conscious world thanks to your products. So we are truly inspired by everything you stand for and by your incredible company and the fact that you're using it to really change the world. And so David, thank you so much for joining us today on Our Hen House. We so look forward to staying on top of all you're doing and to staying clean and fresh smelling because of everything you're doing as well.

DAVID: Awesome. Yeah, thanks for having me.

JASMIN: That was David Bronner.