

Sensible Reason

Shambhala Music Festival: Blazing a Trail in Harm Reduction [Interview]

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In light of negative press within festival culture, initiatives for responsible partying and harm reduction have become a hot topic of debate within the community. I have witnessed more US festivals than ever that are working in various ways to promote a safer festival culture this season. **The fact that the issue of safety has been brought to the forefront of the festival community shows that we are evolving in the right direction**; however, some of these incentives have been harshly criticized, leaving it unclear as to whether or not progress is actually being made. The main issue seems to be the ability to provide festival guests with ample preventive and educational resources for their particular walk in life to create the safest party environment possible.



Shambhala Music Festival in BC, Canada is championing an efficient model for ensuring a safe party experience through harm reduction programs. The festival went above and beyond to ensure all guests were informed, safe and comfortable during their festival visit, making them trailblazers on the party scene. The festival's main objective in these initiatives is to meet people judgment free to ensure the safest party experience. **What can genuinely be admired about Shambhala is the fact that they are working to remove the stigma of providing various harm reduction resources.** There are six departments within Shambhala's harm reduction program: Sanctuary, ANKORS, Women's Safe Space, Options for Sexual Health, Camp Clean Beats and The Outreach Team.

The Sanctuary is a safe, quiet and beautiful haven for anyone who is overwhelmed in any capacity to rest; it is also full of compassionate volunteers who are there to listen to anyone who needs to talk. **ANKORS** provides festival guests with harm reduction supplies, services and information about STI prevention and safe partying. **Women's Safe Place** is opened 24-hours a day for any self-identified woman in need of support and a safe space away from other festival goers; it is staffed by all women and provides crisis support and post-festival resources. **Options for Sexual Health** provides non-judgmental and accurate sexual education, including free condoms with an emphasis on mutual consent. **Camp Clean Beats** is a camping area for only clean and sober guests who wish to camp separated, but still enjoy the party on festival grounds. All of these departments are actively initiated by the **Outreach Team**; a team of volunteers whom roam festival grounds and provide guests with information on safety and harm prevention.

Interview



Stacey is the manager of harm reduction and oversees all six departments; she is also the creator of the Outreach Team. We had the chance to catch up with her in the middle of Shambhala mayhem to discuss her inspiration for getting involved with the festival in this capacity, the mission of the harm reduction departments, and pointers on how we can bring these initiatives back to the US in order to create safer festival environments.

Sensible Reason: What inspired you to get involved with Shambhala's harm reduction programs?

Stacey: I was just a patron, a guest, during my first year here [at Shambhala]. I found it really fun, but I also wanted to give back to the community so I started volunteering at the ANKORS booth, doing education and prevention stuff. I realized that a lot of people weren't coming to the booth, and that we could use an outreach team to get more people, so we created the Outreach Team. We have people roaming the grounds on bikes and on feet at all times, even meeting guests at the gate when they are coming in with radios so that they can connect with Sanctuary and First Aid team as needed. That [the outreach team] was my baby. Then we started Women's Safe Space four years ago. I had a mentor named Zack who was doing my job; he's a nurse practitioner who was on his way out, so he recruited me to take over his job.

Sensible Reason: What do you think that all of these harm reduction and preventative measures do for the overall festival environment?

Stacey: I just got goose bumps. I think that our guests feel supported and no judgment; they feel accepted for where they're at. **That our**

intention: to meet people where they are at, and give them some support and resources to be able to make the best choices for themselves and have the safest party experience.

Sensible Reason: Is this harm reduction/preventive action model common here in Canada? We're actually from America and don't see such thorough programs like this back in the states.

Stacey: We [Shambhala] are leading in the sphere; **we are trying to be champions of this model.** You have to have first aid at festivals, and you have to have a medical tent. Some other festivals have sanctuaries for people who need that extra support, but in terms of other departments we are trying to meet the needs of our guests. We get feedback from the other departments that we have about the services that they would like then we develop them based on that.

For example, Camp Clean Beats is a sober-dry camp and we have three meetings per day and a morning meditation. So there are partygoers who are planning not to use, and they don't want to camp around. In a normal community, you'd be in your house and if someone was abusing next to you, you wouldn't notice. But in recovery you need that extra support, so we gave them their own area that's blocked off – they have their own kitchen area and couch lounge where they have meetings. We know they are at our festival, they've been partying with us forever, and we want to support them and meet them where they are at [at any particular time].

Sensible Reason: Do you have any advice on how we can bring that harm reduction, preventive mentality back to the States and work on meeting people where they are to create safe festival environments?

Stacey: I encourage people to be non-judgmental in their approach when dealing with people who are in need; let go of the judgment to find out how to make each scenario safer.

For example, the party is in the heat so harm reduction means making sure people know to drink water, get in the shade, eat food and sleep. It's not a marathon. Make sure to write your name on your drink and hold it. We just give safer tips to people. We are interested in developing our model and providing some support to other festivals, we are working on that. We want to be a resource for other festivals.

Sensible Reason: What percent of Shambhala attendees use the festival's harm reduction services?

Stacey: That would be a hard thing to track; a lot of things we are talking about just involve safer partying. We're trying to give people skills and tips to having the safest party experience. We are way more focused on prevention, so that we aren't crisis oriented. We try to keep people out of First Aid, The Sanctuary and the Safe Space. We talk about consent and respecting boundaries, and that you can't consent if you're under

the influence. The sanctuary is actually used for several different things: if someone is just really hot and needs to cool off, or if someone worked a long day – even some of our crew takes sleeps there, or if you're in line for a few hours and its dark so you can't set up your tent when you get here. The women's safe space is preventative for young women who can't find their tent, and need to be able to sleep it off there. Sometimes outreach will help them find their tent, or other times we're just trying to be preventive.

