

Rusko



people are looking for when they take a bump of coke," Sage says.

But in many cases, the drugs sold at Shambhala are exactly as advertised. Sage chalks it up to "quality control" — something she believes ANKORS' presence helps promote and reinforce. This is the 17th year that ANKORS has partnered with Shambhala, and their onsite team has grown from two people to 70. Their methods have also become more sophisticated over time.

When ANKORS first introduced their progressive services to Shambhala, it was in the form of reagent testing, a method that uses chemical reactions to identify the presence of key substances within recreational drugs. In 2016 however, ANKORS upped their game, and began raising funds to purchase a Fourier Transform Infrared (FTIR) spectrometer to improve the accuracy of readings. The current

opioid crisis, and increase in fentanyl-related overdoses, influenced the decision to upgrade. "In BC the progression of policies has been rapid because of this mass death," Sage explains with noticeable pain in her voice. "Losing thousands of people a year led policymakers to want to try all options, and drug checking is one of the options money was put toward."

The average price of an FTIR spectrometer — a machine which uses a laser to measure the absorption of substances (liquid, solid, gas) across an infrared spectrum — typically costs upwards of \$42,000, and provides a highly accurate reading of present components (as long as they make up at least five percent of the sample). After two years of fundraising efforts, ANKORS secured their spectrometer in 2018 with help from GoFundMe, Shambhala, and festival attendees who opted to

include a small donation at the time of their ticket purchase. Now, attendees have access to five FTIR spectrometers, four of which came along with partner organizations like Interior Health, British Columbia Center on Substance Use (BCCSU), ASK Wellness, Getyourdrugtested.com and University of Victoria (UVIC), who brought a mini mass spectrometer, capable of a second level of testing with more sensitivity.

"To be able to be open and put drugs on the table and have a conversation about it without someone feeling like I'm going to arrest them or judge them means they, at their own pace, can start to integrate those harm reduction messages and practices into their own lives without shame," Sage explains. "Here, our whole concept is [founded on] a culture of taking care of ourselves and each other, and this is just one of the ways we do that."

The testing process is refreshingly human. We fill out a form with checkboxes to provide the ANKORS volunteers with an understanding of how we secured our substances, what we believe them to be and who will be using them. ("It's MDMA. We bought it from a dealer in the campgrounds and we plan on dropping it tonight before Stylust hits the Village Stage." For research purposes, of course.) We are then seated opposite two ANKORS volunteers with an FTIR spectrometer between us. They explain the next steps and ask us to open our gel capsule, and empty a small amount of powder over a sensor that sits in the infrared laser's path. The spectrometer is connected to a laptop that uses software to communicate with a library of compounds more than 10,000 entries deep. "I'm detecting a match in the system for MDMA," the shaggy-haired volunteer behind the laptop announces. It's news we are happy to hear. He and his counterpart, a tank-top wearing dude in a hat cocked to the side, ask if we are familiar with MDMA and its risks, and if we need any additional information today. We thank them and head out the front entrance, past a table of colorful literature, each card detailing the effects of different kinds of common recreational drugs, and instruments like barrels for measuring GHB, clean needles and condoms.

A whopping 3,489 tests were run at Shambhala in 2019. Following each event, Sage publishes a comprehensive report on ANKORS' festival findings. Some of the most recent releases can be read here: [ankorsvolunteer.com/reports](http://ankorsvolunteer.com/reports).

"Everyone who is part of this team feels like they are a part of a movement," Sage emphasizes passionately. "A movement against prohibition, a movement against stigma, a movement towards being empowered. We are all a part of this, so I want people to leave the tent feeling that they are a part of the movement too." We definitely do.

#### MEDICAL

Just footsteps away from the ANKORS tent is Shambhala's 24-hour medical headquarters. Powered by more than 200 of BC's registered healthcare professionals, the team covers a wide spectrum of expertise: nurses, paramedics, ICU professionals, toxicology experts, a local