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The Two Black Women Helping To Reclaim & Encourage Natural Psychedelics Use In Oakland



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Photos courtesy of those interviewed.

Almost 15 years since the death of the Bay Area's beloved Mac Dre, a shrooms & MDMA enthusiast, these women are fighting for psychedelics' healing powers.

One of Mac Dre's most beloved lyrics (https://www.facebook.com/MacDre/posts/267451409962424?comment_id=441206852586878) is from a song titled "Weekend."

"The shrooms I consume are making me laugh/ I'm high as the eye on a fucking giraffe," he raps on the track "Weekend." The song appeared on 2006's *16 wit dre*, a mix album that was released two-and-a-half years after Dre's death on November 1, 2004.

The Oakland-born Dre was a fan of magic mushrooms and MDMA; he even devoted a song to the pair titled "Shrooms and E-Pills."

So, it's likely that he would've celebrated the news of Oakland decriminalizing psilocybin (the scientific name for magic or psychedelic mushrooms). In June 2019, Oakland City Council passed a local ordinance to decriminalize certain natural psychedelics (<https://www.sfchronicle.com/bayarea/article/Oakland-expected-to-vote-tonight-on-whether-to-13937792.php>) like mushrooms, ayahuasca, peyote and DMT. (Synthetic psychedelics like LSD and MDMA are still illegal, and psychedelic mushrooms and other natural hallucinogens are technically still illegal under California state law and federal law. The ordinance also doesn't legalize the sale or distribution of psychedelic mushrooms.) Approved a month prior to Denver's voter-led ballot initiative to decriminalize psilocybin, Oakland's

resolution is a continuation of California’s progressive drug reform history. The state **became the first in the country** (<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/jun/09/california-legal-marijuana-business-pot-dealers>) to legalize medical marijuana in 1996.

“These are not drugs. These are healing plants ... We just think they should never have been made illegal to begin with,” **Carlos Plazola**, founder of **Decriminalize Nature Oakland** (<https://www.decriminalizenature.org>) (DNO), an advocacy group dedicated to making natural medicine accessible to Oakland, told the **Guardian** (<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/jun/05/oakland-magic-mushrooms-decriminalize>).

Inspired by his own experiences using psychedelic mushrooms to heal from childhood trauma, Plazola created the DNO.

“This is getting the word out about the healing power,” Plazola said. “Many people in communities of color and communities of trauma are not getting access.”

For generations, communities of color utilized natural psychedelics for medicinal purposes. Rooted in spiritual-based healing, the practices of plant-based medicine became whitewashed by America’s **counterculture movement** (<https://www.okayplayer.com/originals/black-people-psychedelic-drugs-monica-williams.html>) of the 1960s. Despite this, black people have continued to experiment with psychedelics. **The creation of hyphy music** (<https://www.revealnews.org/article/getting-down-to-thizzness-a-look-back-at-the-hyphy-movement/>) — a subgenre of rap music that came about in the Bay Area in the late ’90s and rose to prominence in the mid-2000s — was a byproduct of rappers using MDMA, with the late **Mac Dre** at the forefront of that experimentation. Countless Dre songs, like “Weekend” and “Shrooms and E-Pills,” found him referencing not only MDMA but psychedelic mushrooms. While he was alive, Dre had also coined a term not just for ecstasy but for the euphoric effects people felt from taking it — thizz. Dre’s “Thizzle Dance (<https://www.spin.com/2013/02/ecstasy-molly-hip-hop-rap-greatest-moments-history/130227-mac-dre/>)” practically served as an explainer for the term as the rapper (alongside **Chuck Beez**) broke down what thizz is all about: letting your body move as fluidly and erratically as it wants. In 2012, eight years after Dre’s death, Thizz Entertainment (<https://www.npr.org/sections/therecord/2013/09/09/220682752/federal-drug-case-ensnares-the-home-of-hyphy>) — his record label — was implicated in a nationwide ecstasy ring. (Court records revealed that most of the people arrested in the operation had no connection to the label.)

Aware of the region’s previously established relationship with usage of psychedelics and the fear of being criminalized, Plazola wants to transform the headquarters of the DNO into a “**consciousness community** (<https://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-oakland-decriminalize-mushrooms-psychedelic-plants-20190622-story.html>),” a co-working space where people can also reflect on their psychedelic journeys and learn about natural psychedelics. Helping him with this are two Black women: co-founder **Nicolle Greenheart** and community outreach and education activist **Amber Senter**.

Okayplayer spoke with Greenheart and Senter about being involved with DNO, the importance of people of color reclaiming and experimenting with psychedelics and more.

Earlier this year, Denver (<https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2019/05/09/721660053/in-close-vote-denver-becomes-first-u-s-city-to-decriminalize-psychedelic-mushroom>) voters passed a local ordinance to decriminalize use and possession of psychedelic mushrooms, making them the first city in the United States to implement this legislation. How did their efforts inform DNO's advocacy approach towards securing votes by City Council members?

Greenheart: Denver's strategy was focused on psilocybin through a voter-centered route. DNO ensured the resolution included all plant medicine because individuals should have autonomy over what plants they use to heal. We wanted to make sure people had that choice, because there is a wealth of plants. Going the council route resulted in the consultation of professionals in the psychedelic space — scientists, therapists, and input from community leaders before the resolution was presented to council.

Carlos Plazola (<https://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-oakland-decriminalize-mushrooms-psychedelic-plants-20190622-story.html>) previously worked for city council and knew how to navigate and lobby. So it was helpful to have an individual with expertise in Oakland politics. Despite the creation of our resolution being predominantly white in terms of contributions, we received support from the indigenous community, and crafted a diverse team of advocates to discuss legislation with city council members. When we presented at The Public Safety Community, we intentionally chose diverse speakers — men, women, and people of color — so city council witnessed the diversity of voices in the psychedelic movement.

For decades, the lived experiences of white men have dominated advocacy and research strategies for the de-stigmatization of psychedelics. What inspired you to reclaim space for Black women in the resurgence of a natural psychedelics era?

Greenheart: Since childhood, I've suffered from depression and underwent the traditional routes of treatment such as psycho-therapy and antidepressants, which negatively impacted my health. After that experience I asked myself, "How am I going to heal myself naturally?" I tried meditation, yoga, homeopathic treatments, crystals, but I was always looking for community.

I attended an all-day retreat and was intrigued by a ceremonial practice of microdosing huachuma (San Pedro cactus) to align with your higher self and open your heart chakra. Once I found out the healing plant was a psychedelic, I began a one-and-a-half year long research study on psychedelics and attended local community-centered events in the Bay Area. But I noticed I was the only Black person in the room. I questioned the lack of my community in these spaces, because we need this medicine just as much as anybody else. It gave me a new motivation to create space for establishing community for Black people in psychedelic spaces. The integration of plant-based medicine in Black communities is an offering of help and support because I've experienced how powerful and life transforming it is.

Senter: There's an insignificant lack of awareness and education on how medicinal plants can help Black communities. Black voices in psychedelics are obscured by those in positions of power, and I wanted to ensure my voice was heard in these political efforts to decriminalize ISA genetic plants in Oakland. From my own experience dealing with lupus (a

chronic auto-immune disorder), psychedelic mushrooms have been helpful for me. Disorders such as Multiple Sclerosis and Scholar Derma are rampant in Black women and women of color communities. I reached out to Carlos and told him I wanted to be involved, because as an advocate of women of color in the cannabis spaces through Supernova Women, I know the benefits of plant-based medicine for our communities.

Dr. Monnica T. Williams, a researcher based at the University of Connecticut, lead the first-ever MDMA study to focus on the traumatic experiences of black, brown, and other minority groups. Has her scholarship impacted DNO's approach toward the psychedelic movement in Oakland?

Greenheart: I'm familiar with her work and the challenges of getting communities of color to engage with psychedelics in the clinical and/or therapeutic route. I previously held a stereotypical perception of psychedelics as a recreational hippie drug for white people. It wasn't until I started researching the medicinal purposes of psychedelics that I wanted to destigmatize psychedelics in the Black community and advocate its healing purposes. Specifically, to treat the trauma expressed by members within our community while promoting responsible usage. I want to model how to be a safe and responsible user without going the clinical route. There is a place for the therapeutic model and for individuals who want to participate within a community-based environment, while receiving support and being safe.

Due to decades of anti-Black legislation regarding drug use in the United States, how has DNO modified its community outreach efforts towards the incorporation of communities of color in the psychedelic movement?

Sender: I'm from Chicago, so there's a regional difference in reception of natural plant medicines compared to Oakland. Indigenous and Latinx communities have been very open and welcoming to the decriminalization of natural psychedelics. I expected resistance from the Black Church, but attendees have understood that God made these plants for healing purposes.

In the midst of the Bay's hyphy (<https://www.complex.com/music/2016/06/hyphy-oral-history>) movement, regional hip-hop artists rapped about their use of thizz throughout the era, particularly Mac Dre. Have you reached out to local rappers to bridge the connection between the Bay's hip-hop community and natural psychedelics?

Greenheart: There needs to be collaboration between hip-hop and psychedelics. Whether the merger is a conference — we need people to join in. We're a small team with limited capacity, so we need to hear from local artists to participate in this movement alongside us. We're in infancy, so everybody is waiting to see what happens.

Taylor Crumpton has written for Pitchfork, PAPER, Teen Vogue, Marie Claire, and more. You can follow her @taylorcrumpton (<https://twitter.com/taylorcrumpton>)

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