Riverstyx: A Small Family Foundation That Funds Psychedelic Research and Other Fringe Causes

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The Riverstyx Foundation is no ordinary family foundation, something that quickly becomes apparent when you visit its website. Its mission statement declares that the foundation "works to provide a bridge to the relinquished parts of ourselves, our society and our ecology, and to ease those fears and prejudices by funding projects that demonstrate the potential for healing and beauty, when life is embraced in its fullest expression."

When you dig a bit deeper, you read that Riverstyx is particularly keen on supporting "fringe and early-stage projects" across its four focus areas: Psycho-Spiritual, Bio-Cultural, Societal, and Indigenous. A good portion of Riverstyx's work focuses on promoting psychedelic research, including as treatment for cancer-related anxieties, addiction and PTSD.

Riverstyx's mailing address is in Kirkland, Washington, where the family behind the foundation, the Swifts, have strong ties. The foundation's vice president, meanwhile, is Santa Cruz-based T. Cody Swift, with whom I recently spoke to learn more about the foundation's unique work and the story behind it.

This philanthropic story begins with Cody's grandmother, who steered a large foundation. Her father was one of the original CEOs of UPS, founded in Seattle in 1907. When Swift's grandmother passed, her foundation split. Swift, only in his early 20s at the time, tells me he was compelled to step up. He admits that he didn't really know much about philanthropy, but sensed a lot of potential. "I was just drawn to it. And my immediate family, especially my father, trusted me to run with it as I wanted. So at 22 or 23, here I was tasked with laying out giving vision and philosophy of the foundation."

Out of this work, Riverstyx was born in 2007. Swift, who holds a master's in existential phenomenological psychology and has a private clinical practice in Northern California, has always been interested in questions of transformation and healing. And he believes that philanthropy should lean into these issues, rather than just fund run-of-the-mill causes. He tells me that philanthropy should "not be taking the place of government, funding basic services and already known paradigms. Instead, it has the unique responsibility and opportunity to give support to things that otherwise would never be funded through government or the democratic process."

Consider Riverstyx's Psycho-Spiritual area and its work in psychedelic research. While psychedelics have reentered the mainstream conversation thanks to Michael Pollan's book *How to Change Your Mind: What the New Science of Psychedelics Teaches Us About Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression, and Transcendence,* when Swift started digging into this work more than a decade ago, he says almost no one was talking about it.

After graduating with a psychology degree, Swift had his first real formative mushroom journey in Bellingham, Washington. He tells me he had an incredible experience during which he could just watch the psilocybin—a psychedelic compound found in mushrooms, for the uninitiated—"melting away all the constructed paradigms and constructs of my reality. It gave me such an insight into the interplay between our mind and external reality and helped me realize that the world as we see it is not necessarily the way it is."

Swift thought these substances could be incredible tools for understanding the mind. He started doing internet research and learned about early trials at UCLA in which researchers were administering psilocybin to patients with cancer-related anxiety and emotional distress. "It was providing great relief from the fear of death and the mediating factor was this ego-loosening, this loosening of our constructed self, and all the constructs that we overlay on our identities," he says.

"I thought that was the most Buddhist, cool thing I've ever read, so had to be involved."

Swift emailed Johns Hopkins, where researchers were doing similar work, and discovered an early psilocybin trial without any other identified sources of funding. In a story of perfect timing, Riverstyx ended up funding the trial to completion, which, along with NYU, became the basis for a publication highlighting the possible benefits of this treatment for depression and anxiety. And through the years, Riverstyx has supported other psilocybin and MDMA research, including through the Heffter Research Institute, on whose board Swift serves.

Swift is not naive, and knows that there's still stigma around, say, using these substances on a jaunt to Joshua Tree—never mind backing them with philanthropic dollars. First, he emphasizes to me that the philanthropic money funding this research is entirely legal. There was a time when the government was pumping money into this research, but since 1970, 100 percent of funding has come from individuals and private foundations. This makes philanthropy a critical ally in what Swift considers to be invaluable research.

And apart from an assist by star author Michael Pollan in the PR battle, Swift also mentions that this research has found bipartisan support of late, especially with respect to the potential these substances have with veterans suffering from PTSD. "There've been very conservative Republican groups who have given great support to MDMA research," Swift explains. Last winter, hedge funder Robert Mercer and his daughter Rebekah donated $1 million through their family foundation to the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies (MAPS) to complete clinical trials with veterans battling PTSD.

There's a way in which the foundation's seemingly disparate focus areas connect. Another focus, Societal, digs into drug policy and criminal justice reform, as well as end-of-life care. The foundation has backed organizations such as Yoga Behind Bars and Economic Opportunity Institute, a progressive policy group in Washington State. Swift is heartened by this work and believes there's a huge sea change happening. "More people are starting to understand that these incredibly restrictive and regressive laws on drugs are not right and are not well-informed," he says.

Swift also mentions an initiative in the upcoming 2020 political cycle that could fully decriminalize personal possession of all drugs, moving away from a criminal paradigm to a treatment paradigm. "Portugal did that in 2001, and had resounding success," Swift notes. To that end, since 2011 Riverstyx has been supporting a pilot program in Seattle called Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion (LEAD), which allows "law enforcement officers to redirect low-level offenders engaged in drug or prostitution activity to wrap-around social services instead of jail and prosecution."

Listen to Swift long enough, and you start to feel like you're gliding down a river toward enlightenment, as well. Consider his explanation of Riverstyx's work in the end-of-life treatment arena on the one hand, and in composting on the other. Swift notes that we spend billions annually in medicare dollars during the last two months of life. "Half of all medicare dollars are spent trying to prevent what is a very natural process. So much of what fuels our anxieties in life and our overconsumption and our destroying of the environment are our attempts to shield us from the existential truth of our death," he says.

Similarly, Swift laments the way we treat the environment, particularly with respect to environmental waste. "This may seem far afield," he says, "but I really think there's some connection between the way we treat our excrement and how we think of death. But what if what was considered waste could actually be food and nutrients for our plants?" The Riverstyx Foundation supports work around green burial and the legalization of composting toilets.

As far as getting in touch with this unique foundation, Swift tells me that almost all of its funding has been proactive. Riverstyx has done around $1.7 million in grantmaking in recent years, generally giving grants in the four- and five-figure realm. Swift does say he's very open to talking to other funders who are interested in getting involved in this space. "There's a lot of openness in funding this very edgy work."

Before we ended our conversation, Swift also told me about the foundation's Indigenous focus area, which revolves around peyote conservation, protecting a plant that has held great spiritual significance and medicinal value in indigenous communities for over 10,000 years. Swift was introduced to Sandor Iron Rope, former president of the Native American Church of North America, a pan-tribal spiritual organization in which more than 25 percent of Native Americans across the United States participate. It's the largest indigenous religion in North America, and yet it flies well under the radar. "An all-night ceremony utilizes peyote to help heal postcolonial trauma, alcoholism and reconnection to their culture and spirituality," Swift explains.

When Swift found out that all of the land where the peyote grows is now privately owned by ranchers, he was compelled to act. RiverStyx has so far purchased 600 acres in Southwest Texas and is building relationships with local ranchers so that these indigenous cultures can reclaim and be stewards of their medicine once again. This is yet another far-afield project for Riverstyx.

But remember, this is a foundation on the hunt for early-stage movements on the fringes of philanthropy and society. "Often when we push things out, that's when they become problematic. Actually bringing them into the fold of society and our consciousness has great power," Swift says.

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