

# From Peacekeeping on the Front Lines to Brewing on the Riverfront

An interview with Robert Rivers  
at Imagine Nation Brewing Co.

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The stained glass surprised me the first time I walked in the door of Imagine Nation Brewing Co. Reigning over the back wall from floor to ceiling, it contrasted warmly with the brewery's reclaimed wood furnishings. The full spectrum of color made me smile after a long day of work.

Robert Rivers, the master brewer and co-founder of IMBC, walked around the sinuous curve of the bar, stained blue by hungry beetles when it was a ponderosa pine in the mountains. He shook my hand with both of his, eyes smiling behind black-framed glasses.

"Welcome to our space," said Robert. "I see you've noticed the art."

Robert explained that he and his wife, IMBC co-founder Fernanda Menna Barreto Krum, chose this 100-year-old stained glass as the centerpiece for the brewery mostly because it's beautiful. But also because it's a conversation-starter that gets people talking, which is part of what their business is about.

Robert led me to a high wooden table overlooking the Clark Fork River. Outside, the brewery's back deck was covered in puddles from the day's rain. I sipped my milk stout, the creamy beer a delightful balance of sweet and bitter.

"Our slogan is 'Beyond Beer,' because we believe that beer can act as a vehicle for something bigger," Robert told me. "That's why we've created the first-ever brewery that's also a center for community



The brewery features plenty of perks for Missoulians who give back to the community. **Half-price pints** are offered for nonprofit workers on Thursdays and for teachers on Fridays.

IMBC hosts musicians four times a week as well as all sorts of community events. Check [ImagineNationBrewing.com/events](http://ImagineNationBrewing.com/events) for the schedule.



transformation. Our great hope is that people take their love of craft beer and come together to make the world a better place.”

“Why not leave it at making beer?” I asked.

Robert grinned. “Because it makes people feel good to do good. Including me.”

His fascinating story unfolded. Born and raised in Helena, Robert spent 12 years working as an International Peace Building Specialist in high-stress international conflict zones around the world, including hot spots like Israel, Mexico, Palestine, Romania, and Sri Lanka.

“Conflict zones are like pressure cookers: They destroy most of the people living in them,” explained Robert. “But diamonds emerge, too, and you meet the most amazing people who are working to help others.”

Robert focused on training unarmed civilians in how to use nonviolent methods to enhance security in their community. He and Fernanda met in Romania when she attended one of Robert’s training sessions. Fernanda had worked as a trauma psychologist in her native country of Brazil, and specialized in helping to heal children. The couple fell in love, and traveled together mediating conflicts in Moldova, the Philippines, the Middle East, and South Sudan.

“It’s incredibly challenging to kiss the suffering of the world on the mouth. It’s also unbelievably meaningful,” said Robert. “After being on the front lines in war zones for a decade, I was burned out. I needed a place to reconnect with myself, and nature, and my family. But we also wanted to find a way to keep doing good.”

Seven years ago, Robert and Fernanda were sitting in a bar in Brazil when it hit them: Beer brings everyone together, regardless of political affiliations or cultural background. They began brainstorming how to build a microbrewery that also fueled social change.

“In American society, we’re often just as polarized as those in conflict zones abroad,” said Robert. “We’ve stopped trying to find the truth in everyone. Fernanda and I wanted to create a place where people can build bridges across divides.”

The first major hurdle: learn how to brew. Robert started experimenting with recipes and ratios at home. He enrolled in a month-long brewing and malting science course in Madison, Wis., and completed an internship at the Old Schoolhouse Brewery in Winthrop, Wash. Finally, he was ready to put his skills to the test in Missoula. One year and two months ago, they opened the doors at IMBC.

“It was a big leap of faith to go from making beer in the bathtub to making 200 gallons for public consumption,” Robert said.

Robert and Fernanda chose Missoula as the home base for their microbrewery “because there are big world perspectives in this small town, and people are invested in helping one another.” Case in point: The Missoula Redevelopment Agency was instrumental in making their dream come true. MRA purchased half of the parking lot for public parking, installed lights and cleaned up the right of way, envisioning IMBC’s East Broadway building as an anchor for the pending Fox Hotel development along the river corridor.

IMBC is doing its part to make the world a better place by giving 10 percent of the net sales of all glasses sold back to the community through its “Crucial Cause Campaign.” They also provide a fully equipped meeting room and professional facilitation services, both available on a sliding scale for nonprofit organizations and businesses interested in holding meetings, workshops, or presentations.

As we stood up to say goodbye, I asked Robert if he liked making beer.

“I love making beer because there’s a magic in fermentation. Yeast is the oldest symbol for human transformation.”

And then he paused, looking out at the river. “But I do miss being out in the world.”