

## Profile: Aschwin de Wolf



*Aschwin de Wolf in Portland's industrial district.*

*By Nicole Weinstock*

If you were an avid puzzler or a member of Facebook in 2014, then you may recall the trending release of Clemens Habicht's "1,000 colors" jigsaw puzzle. An ode to CMYK printing, it showcases the spectrum of four inks used in this industry standard: cyan, magenta, yellow, and key (black). The puzzle allots one piece for every tone in the color gamut, encouraging a more intuitive approach to assembly than most. While "1,000 colors" is arguably quite bold and synergistic in concept and presentation, it also exudes a level of nuance and singularity, calculation, and detail. It is the perfect introduction to New York-based cryonics advocate and prominent cryonics leader, Aschwin de Wolf.

Though Aschwin's involvement in the field dates back to the early 2000s, he is perhaps best known for his position as CEO of Advanced Neural Biosciences (ANB), which he co-founded in Portland, Oregon despite initial skepticism about its location. In 2019 he turned heads once more as he led the charge to launch a second ANB office focused on theoretical research in one of the original hot spots of cryonics: New York City. Aschwin was also the co-founder of the nonprofit *Institute for Evidence-Based Cryonics*, and is editor of the quarterly [Cryonics magazine](#) published by the [Alcor Life Extension Foundation](#). He founded and regularly contributes to the online platform [Biostasis](#), and frequently serves as cryonics consultant and advisor for domestic and global initiatives.



*Aschwin smiles with a glass of wine in the window of a Fifth Avenue hotel overlooking the historic main branch of the New York public library in midtown.*

As ambitious as he is, work-life balance is an important value in Aschwin's life and perhaps a vestige of his European roots. He actively cultivates many niche interests ranging from independent niche perfumes to Japanese avant-garde music. Aschwin maintains [a blog focused on natural wines and lambic](#), organizes fermentation meetups, and keeps a vigilant eye for the next best wild game burger. He also pursues unique personal challenges like a week-long water fast or a 100,000 steps-in-a-day Fitbit challenge (equivalent to 50 miles). As you will come to find, the relationship between time and an insatiable curiosity strongly motivates his commitment to cryonics, the future, and life at large.

## **Art Smart**

Aschwin warms his hands around a cup of Genmaicha to combat the damp cold of a wintry day. Staring at his brown rice green tea, he admits, "One thing that I hear a lot is, 'You know so much about so many things. Where do you find the time?'" As a self-identified introvert, Aschwin enjoys stretches of solitude, and suspects that this is not unrelated. He adds, "That period on my own, of recovery, is also a period where I can read a lot, learn a lot."

His home has no shortage of supporting evidence. At the de Wolf residence, you can expect the sights and sounds of a life spent diving deep into art, film, music, and wine. You are immediately greeted by the authentic tones of vinyl. Maybe you recognize the soft mezzo-soprano of the late "Queen of Disco," Donna Summer, or perhaps you hear a rare compilation of sound recordings from non-operational trains. Indeed, Aschwin's collection of 600-plus records, some of which are stacked in repurposed wine crates—a subtle hint at another de Wolf passion—provide quite a number of musical possibilities for the newcomer.

Aschwin's fascination with atonal and experimental music is partly rooted in a childhood spent largely at his grandmother's home. Her neighborhood was simple and small, which allowed its other seemingly mundane characteristics to acquire greater value and a comforting familiarity. Aschwin recalls, "Just hearing manufacturing sounds, trucks or white noise...A lot of that sound is not something that I *endure*. It's literally very pleasant for me."

Just as his musical taste reflects a contemporary leaning, so too does the design of his home. Reminiscent of a gallery, Aschwin's clean white walls are adorned with a spectrum of framed art throughout. An album poster from New York underground rapper, Roc Marciano, hangs next to that of Los Angeles-based chillwave singer-songwriter, Nite Jewel. Faye Dunaway's hauntingly shadowed face from an original 1970's movie poster for the *Eyes of Laura Mars* stares down a series of photographs from childhood. They are close-ups of textures and shapes from his grandmother's attic and some of the earliest evidence of his attraction to abstract art. Then there is the poster for the small but mighty Belgian lambic brewer, *Cantillon*. Did I mention that Aschwin wrote an internationally-respected blog about lambics and wild ales for a decade?



*One of 3 images in "Druivenstraat," a collaborative series of artworks (2015) by Aschwin de Wolf and Avantika Bawa. The photos were taken in the attic of the former home of the late Eva van Oosten, Aschwin's grandmother, at Druivenstraat 1, Leiden in 2014.*

An audiophile and art lover, Aschwin is also quite the film buff. In an exercise to define his movie taste more sharply, he reduced his movie display to reveal only his favorite twenty-five films. From Michelangelo Antonioni's *Red Desert* (1964) to *The French Connection* (1971) to *Dawn of*

*the Dead* (1978), his all-time favorite movie, Aschwin's collection reflects a continuing enthusiasm for many of the themes that drew him to film as a teenager: horror, post-apocalyptic science fiction, and slasher and zombie movies from the late 70s and early 80s. He observes, "This interest persists today but I have come to recognize that I was less interested in the blood and gore than in cinematography, atmosphere, and survivalist elements in those films."

While Aschwin's movie collection is small but epic, so too is his library. Well, "library" might be a strong word, but the two industrial chic glass and steel bookcases that hold his carefully curated library make for quite an eye-catching marriage. Titles like W.G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*, J.G. Ballard's *Crash*, Reggie Oliver's *The Dreams of Cardinal Vittorini*, Damian Murphy's *The Imperishable Sacraments*, and DeLio's *The Music of Morton Feldman* peek out from behind glass panes. Fiction and nonfiction are separated, and some books are part of print runs that were capped at a couple hundred copies. They may bear any one of a number of artisan touches: high quality paper, elegant bindings, or uniquely colored ink. "I don't feel like I collect expensive books or even necessarily rare books," says Aschwin. He continues, "If something's beautiful and appealing and you see it made with great care and passion, then it's worth owning."

Though Aschwin's paperback collection has certainly diminished since childhood, the caliber and themes of his literary preferences have not in large part. But then again, this is largely because these preferences were never particularly juvenile to begin with. "I kind of skipped this 'young adult' period [growing up]," he explains. He continues, "When I was able to read, I started reading things like Edgar Allen Poe, and the great novelists." Indeed, the Hardy Boys and any other literary teen posse catalogued with the abbreviation "YA" had no place in Aschwin's childhood.

## **Dutch Roots**

His name may have thrown you for a loop— "Ashvin" is a popular Hindu name—but Aschwin was born and raised in the land of the wooden shoes. His favorite color happens to be orange, the most historically and culturally relevant color in the Netherlands, but he is quick to credit coincidence in this matter.



*Aschwin's grandmother cradles her grandson, the start of what would become a very close relationship.*

Aschwin grew up in the city of Leiden in the province of South Holland in the Netherlands. It is the birthplace of Rembrandt and home to the oldest university in the country. The Leiden Observatory has also been a significant center for astronomical study since the 1800s. It is just a stone's throw from the Hortus Botanicus of Leiden, the oldest botanical garden in the country. The city's continued reverence for both the arts and sciences makes it a rather fitting backdrop for someone like Aschwin.

An "active child," Aschwin notes with a smirk, he kept an unofficial residence at his grandparents' home growing up. He preferred the wear and tear of their more aged residential and light-industrial neighborhood. Even more so, he enjoyed spending time with his grandmother, Eva, who was quick to knit him (black) sweaters or bake him Dutch pancakes. Though she has since passed, Aschwin still thinks of her as his greatest life example. He describes her as "one of the most supporting, selfless, and tolerant persons I have ever met. She was good-natured, generous, and never pushed or demanded anything. This is something many people strive for but to her it was second nature."

Aschwin's closest friendships were nurtured inside and outside of class, and in particular, through his favorite sport: basketball. He played on teams until university and sponsors season tickets to the Leiden basketball team for his parents every year. Aschwin has also been a loyal season ticket holder for the Portland Trail Blazers since 2012. In addition to playing basketball, he was also a keen (video) gamer, utilizing the legendary 8-bit Commodore 64 home computer and a cassette player on a "healthy" diet of hamburgers and coke. While kombucha has replaced coke, and



gourmet burgers are only consumed sporadically, he still has a strong interest in atmospheric adventure games like *Myst* or *Gabriel Knight*.



*Aschwin as a boy with his parents, Matthijs and Neeltje, at Europe's biggest playground, Linnaeushof, in 1979.*

Though Leiden is known for its university, Aschwin chose to attend the University of Amsterdam. At the time, the Dutch university system was almost exclusively based on test scores, rather than attendance, participation, or homework. These were favorable conditions for a self-motivated and intelligent introvert like Aschwin. It freed up quite a bit of time for him to hone other curiosities: he volunteered at a local experimental music store, cultivated an interest in designer clothing, and in general, became well-acquainted with the city and its many characters. He even lived in a small apartment in the Red-Light District for some time.

Aschwin specialized in Public Administration within the political science department. It was an interesting time to pursue social science, he explains, as the fall of the Berlin wall was still relatively recent, and some professors were still recovering from their 1960's Marxism. His ever-increasing interest in economics heavily influenced his eventual master's thesis, which critically reviewed orthodox theories of market failure. It was dense and theoretical, and his assessors had to pull a professor from the school of economics to ensure its fair evaluation.

## Discovering Cryonics

As Aschwin closed in on graduation, he discovered that his passions and preferences were a mismatch in the working world. He explains, “I was interested in politics, but I did not want to become a politician or public official. I was interested in philosophy and economics, but I disliked academic culture.” The professional unknown, combined with a growing dissatisfaction with Amsterdam and Dutch culture, led him to join his then-partner in an overseas move to the U.S. Though he had intended to leave his studies incomplete—he was one class short of his Master’s degree—he quickly reversed his decision in deference to his parents. He flew back to the Netherlands a few times to complete his remaining exams and receive his degree.

After settling down in Arlington, Virginia, Aschwin also spent a couple months in Geneva, Switzerland where he experienced a life-changing medical scare. The cause turned out to be something trivial, but the episode spurred deeper thought on death and aging. After putting finger to keyboard, he ran across [cryonics](#), something he had only ever observed in passing on libertarian websites. Aschwin recalls, “...I found the technical literature quite persuasive, as far as I could understand it, and the associated topics appealed to my growing interest in the natural sciences and disillusion with the social sciences.” Shortly after returning to the U.S., he signed up as a member with Alcor at its Fifth Annual Conference on Extreme Life Extension. It was November of 2002.

From that point onward, Aschwin studied cryobiology and the biomedical sciences in great earnest. His enthusiasm garnered the attention of Charles Platt at the Florida-based cryopreservation research company, Suspended Animation (SA). SA offered him a part-time position and he swiftly moved to West Palm Beach. Over time, he earned full-time employment there, covering a variety of needs ranging from bookkeeping to technical writing to management.

In 2007, Aschwin moved to Phoenix for a year where he began to consult and expand his cryonics writing. He soon discovered that the heat strayed too far from his overcast preferences...But a little city named Portland, Oregon had just the right weather, not to mention many of the elements he missed most from Europe: bike-friendly streets, and great public transit, craft beer, and a music scene that birthed personal favorites such as *Grouper*, *Glass Candy*, and *The Chromatics*. In 2008, he moved to the Rose City, with plans to co-found a new cryonics research company with Chana Phaedra.

## Advanced Neural Biosciences

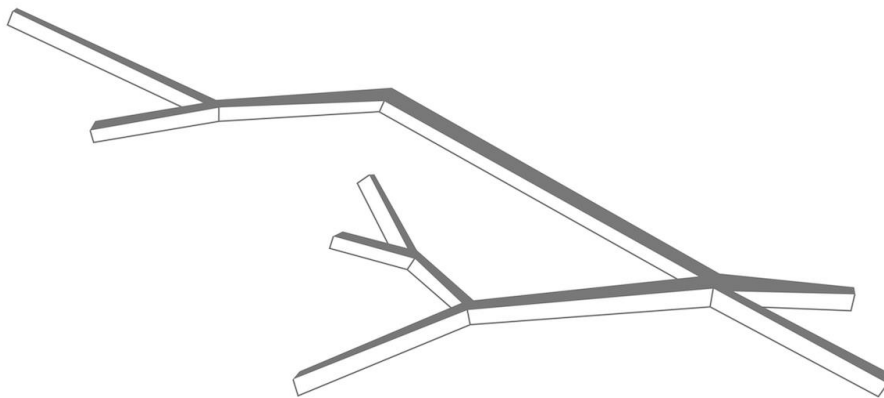
Though cryonics has a strong foundation on the West Coast, the greatest concentration of infrastructure and membership therein has traditionally come from major metropolitan areas in California. The decision to take a chance in Portland raised some eyebrows, but persistence combined with some modest donations paved the way for success. Aschwin and Chana received a

generous monetary donation from *Cryonics Institute* member Alan Mole, a research equipment donation from the *Cryonics Institute* (later followed by Alcor), and free lab space from *Oregon Cryonics* owner, Jordan Sparks. In 2008, they incorporated their research company, Advanced Neural Biosciences, Inc (ANB).

ANB's earliest experiments studied the effects of ischemia on cryopreservation outcome. Though he and Chana both derived a great sense of fulfillment from their work, the first couple of years were tough and demanding. Aschwin recalls how "...we were doing research with little or no compensation on the weekends in addition to our other jobs and contract writing." For him, that included his work as editor of *Cryonics Magazine*. After five years however, the winds shifted. They finally received enough support from Alcor and the *Life Extension Foundation* to sustain their own dedicated research space in Portland. With that upgrade, their experiments became more advanced. They focused on optimizing cryoprotectants for the brain and even reversible whole body biopreservation.

In 2015 he collaborated with former Alcor President Stephen Bridge on a comprehensive introduction to cryonics and Alcor by compiling the best articles from *Cryonics* magazine in a handsome book titled ["Preserving Minds, Savings Lives"](#).

advanced neural biosciences



*Aschwin and Chana revealed this new company logo, designed by Avantika Bawa, when they officially moved to their current Portland research space.*

In ANB's eleventh year, Aschwin took another leap of faith, moving to New York City to launch a second ANB branch focused on theoretical and computationally-driven research. The initial reaction of industry friends and colleagues was not unlike the response to his Portland move from years before. Why not the Bay area? Why not LA?



While most viewed an established infrastructure, a vibrant tech community, and a powerful base of cryonicists as attractions, Aschwin was far more intrigued by the challenge of expanding ANB in a place with great untapped potential. Unbeknownst to many, New York was once home to some of the earliest cryonicists many decades ago, and while the state may not have any established cryonics research or storage companies, it is still home to the fifth highest population of Alcor members in the country. “Hopefully, we can do a kind of 360 and make the most exciting things happen here again,” says Aschwin.



*Aschwin took this meaningful selfie outside his first New York City apartment in 2019 to mark the beginning of ANB-NYC.*

After his official move in early 2019, Aschwin set to work on a number of ANB research projects, starting with the Alcor meta-analysis project with local Alcor member, [Michael Benjamin](#). As Alcor members are aware, the nonprofit creates a publicly available report for every patient case that it handles. The meta-analysis project seeks to consolidate the details of existing and future data into one comprehensive and searchable database. A simple click could then reveal how many cases are unattended deaths, how many cases are straight freezes, how many patients are autopsy cases, and so on and so forth. If trends and correlations between circumstance and outcome could be more easily identified, then they could be used to optimize the methodology of cryopreservation for cases yet to come.

Though the meta-analysis project is still underway, another collaborative project that recently reached completion is the first comprehensive [human cryopreservation procedures manual](#). Co-

authored by Aschwin and Charles Platt, this 700-page manual provides the technical background on cryonics procedures necessary to starting a cryonics organization from scratch. In Aschwin's words, "As a general rule, when people have a technical question about cryonics, it is addressed in that book one way or another." In a field that lacks a standard textbook, he and other cryonicists view this manual as an important record of institutional knowledge.

In terms of other publications, Aschwin has also been working on the hospital-based [Medical Biostasis Protocol](#). A mostly theoretical document, given that cryonics is not yet considered an elective medical procedure, it describes how a cryopreservation should be done in the best of all circumstances (in a hospital setting). According to Aschwin, many cryonics critics cite ischemic delay or injury as evidence of the failure of cryonics; however, he adds, they often fail to acknowledge that such outcomes are reflective of a medical landscape that neither accepts cryonics nor allows for optimal conditions in which to perform a cryopreservation. Aschwin believes that the Medical Biostasis Protocol will provide a strong counter argument for naysayers, a performance baseline for any cryonics storage company, and perhaps even a useful text in legal proceedings.

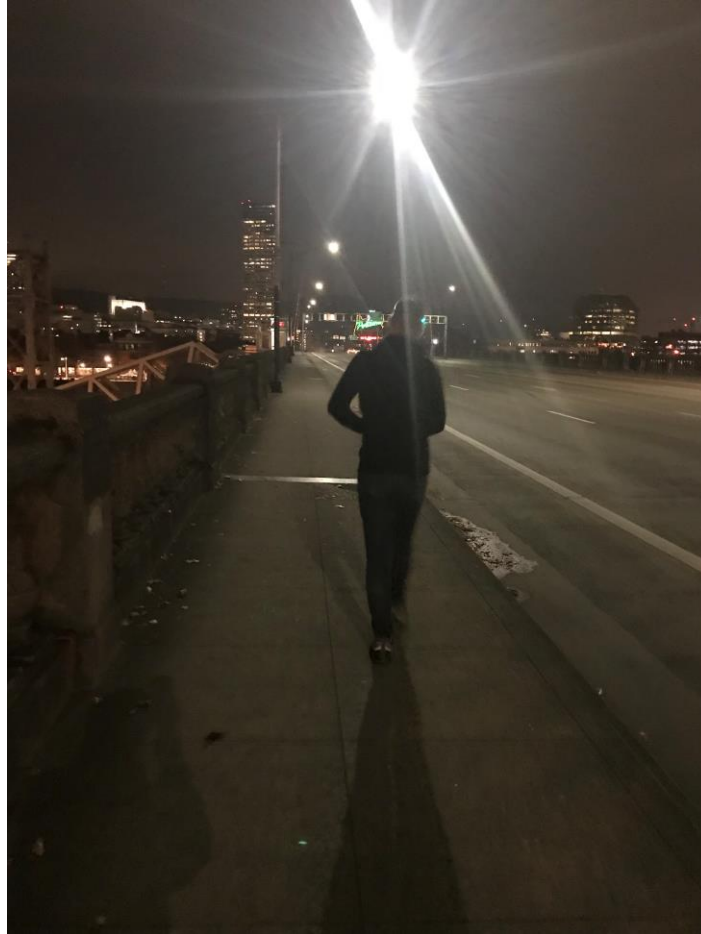
In addition to building case report database and standardizing cryonics through the creation of manuals and protocols, ANB-NYC is also focused on journal publications. Their most immediate goal is to publish a trilogy of papers making the case for cryonics, with each paper addressing specific concerns about the field: what happens to the fine structure of the brain after death, what happens on an ultrastructural level you freeze the brain, and what happens to it when you cryoprotect (vitrify) the brain. [The first paper](#), which was already published in the June 2020 edition of *Rejuvenation Research*, dispels the common belief that the brain rapidly decomposes after someone is pronounced dead. In fact, it demonstrates that it can take many days—if not weeks at low temperatures—before the brain shows significant degradation. The findings were informed by a deep learning algorithm that scanned through various images of the brain post-mortem to distinguish between different instances of ischemia. It is a tool that Aschwin hopes to incorporate in the second paper of the trilogy as well.

It almost goes without saying that Aschwin's deep knowledge and prowess for technical writing is widely recognized in the field. Unsurprisingly, his cryonics output is not just confined to these "nerdy" topics. He also writes more popular expositions of various aspects of cryonics. One major concern in his writings is the inability of many critics to engage with the specifics of cryonics. In his view, skeptics throw around words like "death" and "damage" in a blasé fashion without specifying how cryopreservation technologies affect the fine structure of the brain. He [writes](#), "If a critic of cryonics claims that cryonics is not technically feasible, insist upon a detailed exposition why the forms of damage associated with today's technologies cannot be repaired by future medical technologies in principle."

## **Developing Infrastructure in NYC**

Outside of ANB, Aschwin is also focused on building an infrastructure to make his city a cryonics destination. An important resource in advancing towards these goals is a formal group of NYC-based Alcor members. He first became acquainted with the group as an out-of-town speaker, but soon became a co-leader after his 2019 move.

[The NYC Alcor group](#) has many objectives, first of which is the most basic and historic: socializing. Aschwin explains, “People with outlier ideas like we have - it’s nice to meet in person and feel comfortable talking about the things you care about instead of meeting with cynical skepticism, hostility, or sensationalist questions.” Beyond coordinating meetings, Aschwin has also worked with the group to set up some first response capabilities. Together they created a mutual assistance network through WhatsApp wherein members—after notifying Alcor—can post in the event of a health emergency. Any escalations can reap the benefits of anticipation and a faster response time.



*An advocate of pedestrian lifestyles, Aschwin frequently walks to work and events. Here he walks the final stretch of his 100,000 steps Fitbit challenge over the Burnside Bridge in Portland.*

While this has certainly been progress, Aschwin has his sights set on something even greater. “I don’t want to leave it at that,” he says. “I think we have the aim of being something a lot more ambitious—to basically do all the procedures in New York itself.” To that end, he has worked with the group to acquire Alcor’s previous first response vehicle and set up both a cryonics first response training and a training course for medical professionals interested in cryonics. The group even organized a sold out [cryonics conference](#) in Manhattan in the fall of 2019.

Though the pandemic landscape has limited the group to virtual meetings for the last year, Aschwin anticipates an enthusiastic return to social and training events once conditions allow.

### **Defining Commitment**

In 2022, Aschwin will have two decades of personal and professional commitment to cryonics to his name. In a fringe field that is often subject to harsh mainstream critique, many may ask: how do you stay the course? How do you maintain your resolve? While cryonicists will generally agree

on the obvious—the drive to extend life for yourself and your loved ones—Aschwin’s motivations reveal many layers of consideration that reflect a touching humanism and reinforce an abounding curiosity.

In his view, one of the most powerful promises of cryonics is that of second chances. For individuals who suffer from chronic health conditions, severe trauma, or bad luck, or for those who simply regret poor life choices, cryonics is an opportunity to live a more meaningful life. He explains, “It’s like, ‘I want to have a second shot at this, because for 60 years it’s been so many setbacks.’ Or ‘I’m not proud of the person I was. I need more time to do it.’”

Aschwin is also fascinated by the impact of cryonics on the dimensions of experience. The longer a lifespan, the more one can broaden and deepen experiences or interests. “I think there’s almost no limit to how extensive or deep something can be,” says Aschwin. He continues, “Even if you go really deep into something for a long stretch, then you can do something else that is very deep, and something else, and you can go back again to revisit. Just like you replay music.” One dream that Aschwin would fulfill given an extended lifespan is the recreation of the Monroeville shopping mall that formed the main set for his favorite movie, George Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead* (1978). A project like this would be dismissed within the framework of a typical lifespan, Aschwin explains, “But longevity—real radical life extension—would allow for such projects.”



*Aschwin stands outside the Monroeville Mall during a 2017 visit. It is the main set for his favorite movie, Dawn of the Dead (1978).*



Perhaps one of the greatest rewards of his commitment to the field, is the prospect of witnessing the first revivals of cryopreserved patients. For him, that experience would be “almost equivalent to magic, but not, of course, in a fake unscientific way.” Indeed, the successful resuscitation of patients would symbolize the apex of his career, and the fruition of many years of dedication.

## **The Way Forward**

Cryonics has come a long way since Aschwin joined the field, but there are still many hurdles to overcome. In his view, the future of cryonics rests even more on internal forces than it does on the more popularly acknowledged external forces. His highest priority right now is streamlining organizational and operational standards. According to Aschwin, cryonics is a relatively small field that attracts a disproportionately high number of visionary leaders. Each shift in leadership brings new ideas and priorities into play, often sacrificing the procedural scrutiny that is characteristic of the medical field. He explains, “I think a lot of people are really not aware that cryonics is prone to this yoyo effect. But when the meta-analysis [project] makes that clear, then people will say, ‘Look now, we have these benchmarks, let us see how we’ve done this year.’” Aschwin hopes that the case database and analyses will ultimately help cryonics enjoy slow but steady progress and growth.

His focus on technical and professional standardization does not exclude consideration of other key areas for the growth of cryonics: namely, membership. For Aschwin, the key to expanding the community does not lie in simply using the talking points that worked for the pioneers of the field. He suggests a strategy that focuses on reaching non-members using pro-cryonics arguments that address *their* concerns within their own values system. One of Aschwin’s examples include the classic environmentalist concern about the harmful effects of population growth and life extension on the planet. He recommends a response that the knowledge of your existence deep in the future would more than likely *encourage* rather than discourage more sustainable practices. Aschwin says, “Most people pay lip service to future generations, but when you are part of it yourself, that makes a difference...It’s like the difference in caring for a rental versus something that you own.” Another anti-longevity argument that Aschwin frequently fields is that life is too hard to desire an extension of it. For individuals with these concerns, he focuses on identifying the lack of time as an important culprit, and conversely, the promise of more time as a way to greater ease, healing, and enjoyment of life.

In this vein of thinking, Aschwin draws attention to an article entitled ["Beyond Skull and Skin: Concepts of Identity and the Growth of Cryonics."](#) In this piece, he attributes some of the unfavorable attitudes towards cryonics to the tendency of many cryonics advocates to promote a rather reductionist concept of personal identity and to ignore what most people say matters to them when they think about survival. He says, “If cryonics has any prospect to appeal to more people,

we must present an image of cryonics that emphasizes family, relationships, asset preservation, reintegration, and not just bombard people with technical expositions about brain preservation."



*Aschwin, a keen traveler, in Santiago, Chile in 2015.*

In addition to respecting and addressing the concerns and sympathies of non-members, Aschwin also recommends approaching those who are already somewhat open to cryonics: the low-hanging fruit. Cryonics is a bold socio-cultural stance that simply may not hold appeal for everyone. Resultantly, he concludes that the most promising areas for recruitment are where people are analytical and generally optimistic. "That is where I think we can do a very good job," he says.

Ever living up to the ideal of the "Renaissance Man", Aschwin has a lot of other non-cryonics related projects in the works. On his fermentation blog he aims to dive deeper into the discussion of wine in philosophy and literature. He is working on an art book about an Italian genre movie. He launched an art collaboration with minimalist artist [Avantika Bawa](#) named "Essential Salts" (readers skilled in the art will notice the Lovecraftian reference). Aschwin also aims to publish more about meta-ethics and social philosophy (he penned [an extensive review of contemporary antinatalism](#) a few years ago), and finally, to get his dream of starting a small niche publishing

company off the ground. Given the scope and depth of these interests, it is no surprise that he will benefit from the additional time that the success of cryonics will confer.

*Aschwin resides in New York City, though he frequently travels internationally for cryonics-related events and initiatives. His personal eclectic website is [megapolisomancy.org](http://megapolisomancy.org). He also writes on natural wines and spontaneous fermentation on [amforen.com](http://amforen.com). Most of Aschwin's cryonics output and initiatives can be found at [biostasis.com](http://biostasis.com). He can be contacted through his LinkedIn page.*