



A Rainbow in the Clouds

By Leah J. Matuson

Driving through the quiet town of Sherborn, you may have passed the Peace Abbey with its spectacular sculpture of Gandhi and the life-size bronze statue of Emily the cow. Emily is possibly one of the most internationally recognized bovines due to her escape from a Hopkinton slaughterhouse in 1995. Emily was able to elude capture for weeks, and lived out the rest of her life at the Abbey, revered as a symbol of vegetarianism and the centerpiece of the Sacred Cow Animal Rights Memorial.

Maybe you've seen the Pacifist Memorial with its six significant brick walls, which hold quotes from peacemakers, pacifists, activists and thought leaders throughout the ages, including Albert Einstein, John Lennon, Susan B. Anthony, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Jesus Christ— to name a few.

Perhaps you've noticed the Peace Abbey buildings where you'll find the Peace Memorial Museum and Conference Center, the Multi-Faith Chapel and Guesthouse, the Vegetarian Resource Center, the Coffeehouse and the Greenhouse Cafe.

Part spiritual center, part petting zoo, part museum, part library, committed to vegetarianism, the Peace Abbey encompasses so much that at times it's a challenge for people to figure out how to relate to it. Local people used to see this as a center for disabled children when it was the Life Experience School, but as the school's gears shifted and the Peace Abbey came into being, many residents became unsure of what the Peace Abbey was really all about.



The statue of Emily the Cow.

The Peace Abbey's Roots

The Peace Abbey, a nonprofit, multi-faith, spiritual center dedicated to creating models for social change, teaching and promoting social justice, non-violence, peace and cruelty-free living, was created 19 years ago by Lewis M. Randa, a man with a dream.

The year is 1971. Lewis Randa is discharged from the National Guard as a conscientious objector and needs to perform two years of alternative service. For Randa, alternative service was just the impetus he needed to bring his dream of peace into being.

“Since college, I had wanted to establish a school where children who had special needs could be empowered to see themselves as instruments of peace and at the same time, help their parents interpret their child's disabilities as unique qualifications to bring out the best in others,” says Randa. “This led me to create the Life Experience School.”

Randa adds, “We define peacemaking as the act of bringing out the best in others. Because of their life challenges, the students require greater patience and kindness and generally more love...and we certainly need a whole lot more of that in the world...and out of this mission, evolved the Peace Abbey.”

The creation of the Peace Abbey was inspired by the life of one of Randa's students. “Typically, it's a church that creates a parochial school. Just the opposite occurred here. The Peace Abbey was created from an experience at the school,” says Randa smiling.

The experience Randa is talking about involved the passing of Norman Nylund, a 17-year-old autistic boy who attended the Life Experience School, and who shared the same birthday, October 4th, as St. Francis of Assisi.

“When Norman died of cancer and his body was cremated, his parents thought it was fitting to sprinkle his ashes in Assisi, Italy. By coincidence, we brought the ashes to Assisi on the same day in 1986 that the United Nations held its Day of Prayer for the World,” says Randa. “This was the first time in history that the leaders of the 12 major religions gathered to pray for Peace on Earth.”

When he returned to Sherborn, Randa recited with the students the prayers of the 12 major religions each day and helped each student memorize them. “The heart of the Peace Abbey started to beat when the children began reciting these prayers. The true life of the Abbey is about living the prayers, not just reciting them. “

Just about the same time, Mother Teresa made a surprise visit to the Life Experience School. This visit put all things in perspective and on the fast track. Within two years, Randa purchased the building that is currently the Peace Abbey and he has never looked back.

A Brief Tour

Driving onto the Peace Abbey grounds, the first building you’ll see is the Peace Memorial Museum and Conference Center. This is where the Life Experience School started and resided for quite a while, until several years ago when it was moved to Millis.

Walking into this historic building, you first notice its soaring wooden walls and vaulted ceilings, along with a multitude of miniature flags representing the nations of the world.

A life-size bronze sculpture of Mother Teresa greets you. An unassuming wooden table with 12 wooden chairs is surrounded by wide-ranging displays commemorating lives of people who devoted themselves to peacemaking. This long, wooden-planked table, known as “The Peacemakers Table,” is much more than a piece of furniture. Renowned people of peace have gathered, talked and prayed here. Among those have been Mother Teresa, Maya Angelou and Muhammad Ali. Steeped in atmosphere and history, many weddings and special services have been held here, as well as seminars, conferences and training in non-violent civil disobedience.

Downstairs you’ll find the Coffeehouse, a comfortable and unique venue for performances, recitals, gatherings and concerts. The Conference Center also houses the Greater Boston Vegetarian Resource Center, as well as a section of the Peace and Social Justice Library. The greenhouse attached to the Conference Center is home to the Greenhouse Cafe, a self-serve, honor-system cafe.

The other large building is the Peace Abbey itself, which houses the Multi-Faith Chapel and the Guesthouse. The Chapel, a place of quiet prayer and meditation, houses sculptures, icons, symbols and prayers from the twelve major faiths. The Guesthouse offers accommodations in the tradition of a New England Retreat Center.

The National Registry for Conscientious Objection, created in 1991 following the War in the Persian Gulf, is housed in the Abbey. The National Registry provides an opportunity for those to register their objection to personal, national and international violence.

Every year, thousands of people from around the world visit the Peace Abbey, and the sanctuary has kept a running record of their guests via the Peace Abbey Guest Book. Guests generally write their names, addresses and any comments they have about their visit to the Abbey.

The most recent entry in the Guest Book was that of Manish Mehta, a Jain businessman from Ann Arbor, Michigan. The comment he penned reflected his appreciation of what he found at the Abbey– “What a Treasure!”

Between the two main buildings is the Vegan peace Animal Sanctuary, a safe haven for cows, goats, pigs, and turkeys and other animals who have escaped the slaughterhouse.

Throughout the years, the Peace Abbey has attracted people the world over– from the Dalai Lama, Patch Adams, members of the Gandhi family, Mother Teresa, Howard Zinn, Thich Nhat Hanh, Maya Angelou and Muhammad Ali to Buddhist nuns, Hindu priests and Jain monks, conscientious objectors and their families to world-renowned activists and peacemakers, Nobel Laureates, and people like you and me.

The Abbey Legacy Endowment Trust Program

The Peace Abbey has always operated on donations, as well as on the services and goods it has offered. With just two paid employees, Randa and Program Director and Abbey Chaplain, Dot Walsh, along with several dedicated volunteers, and interns from the local high school and colleges, the Peace Abbey has been able to promote peace and non-violence through its programs for almost 20 years.

But recently, the economic and social tides have changed. Even with many donations coming in, most are small. “We’ve had continuing difficulties attracting funds to operate,” comments Randa. “Since we’ve been more actively involved with protests against the war, larger funders don’t wish to be involved with such a controversial organization.”

Randa is not a big proponent of formal fundraising. "We don't want to compete with other worthy non-profits for money. We want people to respond to our needs without being asked. When they respond on their own they come from a sense of personal desire rather than feeling obligated...the Quakers, the Unitarians and the local Pilgrim Church have always supported us through out the years without ever being asked. Their gifts come from the heart."

So when Randa says the Peace Abbey is not closing, just changing owners, he is quite definitive about it. Randa's wife, Meg, borrowed \$60,000 from their home equity to help keep the Peace Abbey afloat. But Randa knows he needs quite a bit more.

"We're hoping to sell the property to a benefactor, and then lease it back. The money negotiated for the property will go into the Abbey Legacy Endowment Trust program, which should be more than enough to fund the Peace Abbey into the future, long after we are gone.

And although Randa's idea for selling the property, creating a trust, and leasing the site back to Peace Abbey leaders has never been tried before, he is confident that it will work. Walsh, a driving force who has been with the Peace Abbey since its inception, agrees.

"Structuring the sale of the property this way will allow us to have money for staffing and operating expenses, and for renovations. It wouldn't change anything. We could do more; we wouldn't have to continually figure out how we're going to meet day-to-day expenses," remarks Walsh. "It would certainly give us a great deal more time to focus on developing programs in peace, social justice, and nonviolence, as well as creating peace abbeys on college campuses around the world."

Looking Forward

As soon, as word got out about the Peace Abbey being put on the market, donations have been forthcoming. In fact, after receiving an e-mail from a friend about the current financial situation of the Peace Abbey, one donor gave \$135,000 to pay off the debt incurred from the construction of the Animal Rights Memorial.



For now, Randa is hoping to attract \$216,000 in donations by June 30, which would allow time to find a benefactor. But if he is unable to raise sufficient funds, or find a foundation to support the Peace Abbey, one of the buildings will have to be sold.

What will happen? Only time will tell. Randa, Walsh and those who consider the Peace Abbey a part of their lives, are hopeful that a benefactor will come forward before the end of June so the Peace Abbey can remain intact and focused, as they always have been, on promoting peace.

"Who do we want to see buy the Peace Abbey?" asks Randa rhetorically. "It could be a local business person, a movie star or entertainer, a sports figure, a family trust, a university a foundation".

A smile crosses Randa's face. "If this little non-profit can run this property for over 20 years, certainly it's time for someone else to take their turn, someone else to have the privilege of owning a significant property committed to peacemaking."

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Though he's traveled the world over, Randa remarks that he has never seen a place quite like the Peace Abbey. "This may be the one place on Earth where 12 prayers of peace are prayed everyday. And all this," he says gesturing to the Peace Abbey and its grounds, "is a result of those prayers." Maya Angelou appears to echo Randa's sentiment when, after a visit to the Peace Abbey, she said "God put the rainbow in the clouds so even in the dreariest of times we would know there is hope. And that is why the Peace Abbey is here."

For more information about the Peace Abbey, visit their web site at www.peaceabbey.org, or call them at (508) 655-2143.