

SPOTLIGHT

Buddhist community takes over Janesville retreat center

By DANA MELIUS editor@wasecacountynews.com Oct 17, 2017



The Sisters of Holy Francis at the Holy Spirit Retreat Center in rural Janesville: (Left to right) Carmen Fonnek, JoAnn Haney, Jennifer Corbett, Charlotte Hefby and Monique Schwartz. (Dana Melius/Waseca County News)

By DANA MELIUS editor@wasecacountynews.com

It was a bittersweet moment for the Sisters of St. Francis, offering an official goodbye Sunday to the Holy Spirit Retreat Center in rural Janesville.

But while the 20-year ownership of the 30-acre Lake Elysian property is changing hands, Sister JoAnn Haney is pleased with this message of peace and inclusiveness. The retreat center has been sold to Triple Gem North, a group of Buddhist monks and their extended community of supporters.

“We have always been that way,” said Sister Haney, emphasizing that all faiths have been welcomed to utilize the quiet retreat, located four miles north of Janesville on Waseca County Road 3, on the shores of Lake Elysian. “We have always been open to all faiths and all practices.”

Bhante Sathi, a Buddhist monk who founded the Triple Gem North group in 2003, agrees. Those shared values and principles made the transaction a good fit, the Sisters and Sathi agreed.

“For us, it doesn’t matter,” Sathi said Sunday while greeting visitors at the center’s open house and ceremony. “There’s no sense (in his Buddhist faith) that one belief is better than the other.”

While the Triple Gem name is relatively new to the region, Sathi’s been practicing his Buddhist faith and offering meditation teachings throughout the region for several years. The native of Sri Lanka first became a resident monk in 1999 at the Great Lakes Buddhist Vihara in Southfield, Michigan, before moving to Mankato, which he has made his residence.

Triple Gem is Chaska-based but also provides service in the Mankato area. Sathi is the “guiding teacher” at Triple Gem of the North in Mankato and also at the group’s Mindfulness Center in Chaska. The Buddhist monk has also been a meditation teacher at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter and Carlton College in Northfield.

For the Sisters, the Holy Spirit Retreat Center remains in faithful hands. And the message of religious tolerance is needed at this time, throughout the nation, they stressed.

“That’s what we need to do, to just broaden perspectives,” Sister Haney said. “They were very much in sync with how we wanted this center to continue to be, open and inclusive.”

For the sisters, it has been a special community and space. For Sister Charlotte Hefby, it’s been a 21-year place to call home.

“That’s the primary thing that when we looked for someone to sell to, it needed to be one which had the sense of the sacredness of the place and the center,” she said.

Sister Haney also stressed the need for new blood and energy to keep the quiet retreat center focused on its principles of peace and inclusiveness.

“Their extended community is young and full of energy,” she said. “We’re getting old and can’t keep doing it forever.”

An open message to the Waseca County area

It was in an open letter to the regional community throughout Waseca County in which the Sisters of St. Francis echoed many of these words. Dated Sept. 26, the Sisters summed up some of the same feelings shared Sunday.

“We have gotten to know Bhante Sathi and his community over the past number of years as they held their retreats at the Center,” the Sisters wrote. “And, of course, they have gotten to know us and this wonderful place.”

As the Sisters and their neighbors poured into the center Sunday, it allowed all to say their goodbyes.

“Welcoming the new community here also means that we, the ‘old’ community, must say goodbye,” their message continued. “It is not easy for us to leave you or our own small community of sisters, but we have known for a while that we could not continue to care for the Center in the way we would like. Age catches up with all of us. We are grateful for our years here with you and will miss you.”

Neighbors and frequent retreat visitors agreed.

Al Batt, a New Richland area writer and outdoors enthusiast, was among those who attended Sunday’s open house. He said he’s used the retreat often for outdoors walks, lectures and simple reflections and called the Holy Spirit Retreat Center a “hidden gem.”

The five Sisters of St. Francis who have called the retreat center home handed out playing cards of their own, offering some lasting prayers.

“God has done great things through us...God will continue to do great things through you. We are glad.”

Mixed emotions, yes. But the Holy Spirit Retreat Center and its Sisters of St. Francis on Sunday welcomed its new ownership in the same spirit as when they entered Waseca County and on to the shores of Lake Elysian over 20 years earlier.

“We Sisters of St. Francis bless you as much as we can with grateful hearts.”

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