

Murray Grove: Branching Out & Tuning In

By Victoria Lassonde



Photo Credit: Victoria Lassonde

Louise Illé with Michael Masters

Murray Grove Retreat and Conference Center in Lanoka Harbor has long been a place “where love takes root in the world,” and now it is becoming a place where art, music and culture take hold in the hearts and minds of the community.

The organization’s new thrust of community outreach, by way of new programming and the use of online tools for promotion and social networking – e.g., a “rebooted” electronic newsletter and a Friends of Murray Grove group on Facebook, both projects of Assistant Director Michael Masters – is part of an ever-ongoing effort to update and revitalize the facility, an effort that requires, as it does for so many private non-profits, some measure of creativity and a willingness to “think outside the box.”

To that end, the Murray Grove Association is ramping up “a serious annual campaign,” according to Executive Director Louise Illé, in order to tap into the center’s “unlimited potential.” Its leaders have started asking: What can really bring new life to Murray Grove?

“Hopefully it’ll really start to snowball,” she said. “We really want people to come here and enjoy this sacred space.” Underlying the push to nurture a fine and performing arts presence at the center is the idea that, during difficult economic times and challenges in general, people can find strength in drawing closer together, rather than drifting apart.

One way of drawing newcomers is with music. Grove Gatherings are potluck-style dinner and coffeehouse events, held on the second Wednesday of each month. Admission is a \$10 donation and includes dinner at 6 p.m., followed by live music by a featured folk musician from 7 to 9. The Grove Gatherings formerly existed as Eyre Haven Folk Club concerts, organized by Valerie Vaughn of Tuckerton, and are flourishing in their new venue, thanks to some timely confluence and grant assistance from the Ocean County Cultural and Heritage Commission, in conjunction with the New Jersey State Council for the Arts (a partner agency of the National Endowment for the Arts).

Another draw for the public is the annual Drum and Dance Retreat, now in its third year. The weekend-long event invites participants to “express yourself creatively and spiritually” through the study of Afro-Brazilian, Latin and West African drumming techniques and African dance and belly dance styles. The third annual retreat is scheduled for August 13 through 15, and guests can reserve overnight accommodations or day passes to enjoy and participate in nonstop workshops and demonstrations.

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Inscription from John Murray 1770

Illé even envisions, someday, a state-of-the-art performing arts center on the premises – perhaps an amphitheater for musical and theatrical productions.

Denominated Unitarian Universalist or, simply, “UU,” the center’s primary function has been, and continues to be, to host groups for retreats – for congregational/spiritual, business or social purposes; for sports, education or meditation; for families and individuals – and for functions, meetings, workshops, reunions and private parties. Murray Grove opens its doors to people of all religious, spiritual and secular affiliations because, after all, as Illé pointed out, “universal love covers a lot of territory.”

In fact, hospitality ranks right up there with universal love as one of the values that UUs live by. More than just providing shelter, UUs

define hospitality as “creating a sanctuary where mutual respect is fundamental” – where guests are welcomed and cared for, are given opportunities for personal discovery and take part in co-creating a safe environment for learning and reflection.

“We consider this to be sacred ground,” Illé explained, because it was the site of the first Universalist sermon preached by John Murray, widely held to be the father of American Universalism, in 1770. A commemorative plaque hangs above the hearth in the fireside room inside the Lodge building, immortalizing Murray’s wisdom: “You may possess only a small light, but uncover it. Let it shine, use it to bring more light to the hearts and minds of men and women.” On another wall hangs the first officially accepted Universalist credo, written by Rev. Harold Dean of the Lincroft Congregation of Monmouth County. It outlines the UUs’ core belief system, chief among which is the belief “in a creative power at work in the universe, in the mystery and wonder of life, (and) in the redemptive power of love.”

The fireside room, where the Grove Gatherings take place, is cozily furnished with couches and tables and chairs, but “groups are welcome to make this (room) their own” by rearranging the furniture to suit their needs, Illé explained.

Throughout the building, inspiring and educational materials hang in the form of posters and signs. One shows symbols of different faiths from around the world, “because we honor and celebrate all religions,” Illé said. Another charts 100 Unitarians and Universalists Who Made a Difference – a list that includes such notables as Theodore Seuss Geisel (Dr. Seuss), Herman Melville, Kurt Vonnegut, P.T. Barnum, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry David Thoreau.

Located on 20 wooded acres off Route 9 and marked by a simple sign, Murray Grove comprises a main Lodge; two guesthouses, the Weakley House and the Friedrich House, totaling 21 modestly furnished bedrooms to sleep 42 to 50, each with a unique décor and color scheme; a farmhouse and a couple of smaller multipurpose buildings, the Screen House for meetings in an outdoor setting and the Cone House, a two-room auxiliary meeting space tucked back among some trees.

“I love this Cone House, because every window you look out, you see trees, and you feel like you’re far away but you’re not,” Illé said.

Guests can use the large kitchen and dining room in the Lodge to prepare their own meals or arrange for catering service or takeout. The grounds also offer two

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miles of nature trails, a campfire ring, athletic fields, playground, ping-pong and other recreation opportunities. Additionally, guests may walk and worship in an 11-circuit labyrinth, 39 feet in diameter, constructed in the classic pattern found in the Chartres Cathedral in France and popularized by the Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, Masters explained. The labyrinth is named for the association's previous executive director, Ellen Chulak.

At one time the center laid claim to the whole of Thomas Potter's farmstead, totaling about 220 acres, but in 1995 the association sold 200 acres to the federal government to become part of the Edwin B. Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge.

Over the course of 240 years, Universalists turned the property into a thriving spiritual center and summer retreat, a destination for religious and social events, complete with an incorporated association, a church called the Potter Memorial Church (named for the farmer on whose land that first sermon took place) and a three-story hotel called the Murray Grove House. The hotel burned down in 1955 and was replaced by the existing Lodge. The church burned in 1973; its location is now marked by the original church bell and a memorial boulder placed there in 1902.

"The first half of the 20th century was the heyday of Murray Grove," Masters writes in his historical summary on the association's website, murraygrove.org. "It expanded further, in all directions ... There were celebrations and pilgrimages on the centenary, 150th and bicentennial anniversaries of John Murray's sermon, as well as the 50th and 100th birthdays of the Murray Grove Association."

It was a Universalist Camp and Conference Center before the Unitarian and Universalist denominations merged in 1961.

Masters takes on the role of historian at the center in more ways than one. A couple times a year, he said, he puts on Colonial garb and channels Thomas Potter, to tell the story of Potter and Murray's fateful – some might say miraculous – meeting.

As a year-'round facility, the center is constantly working to maintain and upgrade infrastructure. Currently near the top of the to-do list is to replace a roof and some underground pipes, and a long-term goal is to "go green" and convert the center to sustainable energy sources like solar or geothermal, all of which depends of course on donations and volunteerism.

To RSVP for an upcoming coffeehouse event on June 9, July 14 or August 11, or to learn more about any of Murray Grove's offerings or volunteer opportunities, visit murraygrove.org or call (609) 693-5558.



Photo Credit: Victoria Lassonde

Entrance to Murray Grove