

Voluntown Peace Trust

News from "The Farm"



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Winter—Spring 2008

Radical Hospitality

by Kate Foran, VPT Partner

According to local lore, the nooks and crannies in the massive central chimney of the VPT Farmhouse once sheltered people escaping slavery via the Underground Railroad. True or not, the stories are inspiring--people of courage and conscience colluding in acts of radical hospitality. More recently, in the 1980s, what is now the Rachel Corrie House provided a safe haven for women seeking shelter from domestic violence; vets and war resisters have also sought refuge on these lands. And, of course, for the past thirteen years, Camp Ahimsa has provided a taste of country life for kids from Hartford's North End. As we take stock of the long history of the "Peace Farm," and evaluate the past year's work, we have been considering the value of hospitality. For our organization and our community, hospitality is a spiritual discipline, a political act, and an economic practice.

In many ways, VPT is in the "business" of welcoming people. With 57 acres and five facilities, providing hospitality seems intrinsic to this place. VPT's facilities were rented by 36 groups in 2007, and we were booked nearly every weekend. Even beyond rentals, however, the Farm is a "public house." We have tried to track how many stays we have hosted in the Farmhouse over the past year:

- | | |
|-------------------------|------------------------------------|
| • Beds occupied: 235 | • People hosted for day visits: 40 |
| • Meals provided: 664 | • Days with retreatants: 31 |
| • Retreatants hosted: 9 | |

We have welcomed people from all different



*"Hospitality on a political scale requires us to **break down barriers**, share space and resources, and cooperate."*

backgrounds, perspectives, and places. The farmhouse kitchen has been a haven for people from the transgender community, who might otherwise feel unsafe in a small, rural town. Friends from Peru, Venezuela, El Salvador, California and Georgia have slept in the guestroom. We welcomed a local resident who was admonished as a child not even to look at the "communist Peace Farm" as he drove by, so polarized was the community at the time.

Our efforts to practice hospitality have been inspired by the welcome we've received here at the Voluntown Peace Trust. We have been part of a "community of communities" with the Hartford Catholic Worker, the New Haven Catholic Worker, St. Francis House in New London, Haley House in Boston, and many others. In these communities, we feel invited to stop

for a meal or even a nap when we are on the road. Our local neighbors have welcomed us as well. Before Mary, Harold, and Danny even arrived in May 2005, our neighbor Mel, a Gulf

War veteran, had plowed the field in preparation for our gardens. As a practice of hospitality, we have embraced the local custom of the farm stand honor box, whether on our own summer vegetable stand, or on neighbors' egg stands. These boxes, where we leave money and make change, are examples of an alternative economy based on trust, equity, and abundance.

We try to live this alternative economy. One imperative to practice hospitality comes from the fact that none of us owns this land or these lodgings. (Of course, whether anyone can really "own" land is a question.) When the residential community here at VPT practiced our economic fast last summer (a commitment we shared not to buy certain items until we worked out our community budget), we

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Our ability to offer VPT's facilities at reduced rates for low-income rentals depends on your generosity. Your gifts subsidize VPT's hospitality to those who otherwise would not have access to retreats, conferences, or a connection to farm life. For groups working for social change, time together in a different setting is fundamental for personal and organizational formation. It builds community, staves off burnout, and nourishes people for the "long haul" struggle for lasting justice.

Please consider a tax-deductible donation to VPT to support this important work.



Spotlight: Juanita Nelson



Chuck Matthei, Juanita and Wally Nelson in the Farmhouse kitchen.

Juanita Nelson is best known as a leader in the war tax resistance movement. She is also an author, economist, and organic farmer. Juanita has been active in movements for peace and justice since she refused to stay in the back car of a segregated train in 1940. She has used nonviolent direct action to confront injustice throughout her entire life, and through her choice to live simply, she has made her daily life an expression of nonviolence. Juanita has been connected to the Peace Farm since its beginnings. She was an influence on Barbara Deming, the lesbian feminist nonviolence advocate who donated the money to buy the property in 1960. She was also important in the life of Chuck Matthei, who ran Equity Trust from these grounds. As Sarah Karas's story shows, Juanita continues to inspire activists today. Until recently, she lived full time at the Bean Patch, her "off-the-grid" home at Woolman Hill in Deerfield, MA.

The Hospitality of Our Elders

Filmmaker and Catholic Worker Sarah Karas' current film project is a testimonial documentary on life-long activists Juanita Nelson and Frances Crowe. Mary Novak spoke with Sarah about the project and had the privilege to be the interviewer on the film. Below are excerpts paraphrased from their conversation. Pictured are Juanita, Sarah and Mary.

Why did you do this film? Marianne Williamson's "A Return to Love" says our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate, but "that we are powerful beyond measure...there is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that people won't feel insecure around you...when we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others." I am a Catholic Worker and I have never wanted traditional "success." However, I never considered being afraid of being great.

After studying film production in college, I moved into the Hartford Catholic Worker (HCW) seeking a community of people with similar sensibilities about engaging society. I wanted my life to be in conversation with social justice, nonviolence and living so that others could simply live. The problem was I love film, and it is a medium I express myself in; HCW spoke to one part of me, but another part was not being addressed. I needed to do something that tapped into that. The film is about two incredible women. Even in their 80s, they are revealing who they are becoming. I was drawn to them because they were willing to share how their lives have been filled with joy and struggle, and how they have grown and formed themselves along the way. Juanita and Frances have certainly known fear; my interest was in how they worked through it. For me,

beginning this project was intimidating, and I still did it. Just to invite Juanita and Frances was a big step for me.

My audience is people in their early 20s, like me when I started, who are struggling with the questions of "What now?" As a young peace and justice activist with radical dreams for an alternative-to-violence lifestyle, I have been searching for models of those who have taken "the road less traveled." The film presents two models—two women who have had radical ideas for change and have lived those ideas despite their counter-cultural nature.

Please describe your experience of filming Frances and Juanita. They have helped me sort out a lot of my thoughts and beliefs. I have learned that it is ok not to have all of the answers to life's questions; it is important to have the questions and trust that they will take you where you need to be. And they are just fun to hang out with! I have a tendency to hear about people like these women and set them up as two of the peace movement's greatest. Getting to know them has given me a chance to see they are human, making them even more impressive to me. I am so moved that they have been willing to take time to hang with us and be so present to us. There is also nothing like being around Juanita when she laughs, which is often! And I will always remember sitting in France's favorite chair at midnight one night watching a movie while this 88-year old movement elder served me popcorn – the real stuff, not the microwave kind. ☀





happenings

Local Racial Justice Efforts

A recent act of violence targeting a youth of color in nearby Plainfield brought out anti-racist advocates from throughout Connecticut for a rally in front of the Plainfield City hall (below left), including a friend of VPT, Jerimarie Liesegang (right). The VPT Partners attended the rally and encouraged a community response that included a restorative justice principle of reaching out to the family targeted by the violence.



Ruckus Society Training for Trainers

The Ruckus Society—whose mission is to “provide environmental, human rights, and social justice organizers with the tools, training, and support needed to achieve their goals”—held a weeklong *Training for Trainers* at the Voluntown Peace Trust. In addition to catering for nearly 50 participants from throughout the US and Canada, VPT also contributed to the training through the participation of its newest partner, Patricia Adams, in the training itself.



Alternative Thanksgiving

The resident community at Voluntown hosted its second annual Alternative Thanksgiving. Guests from as far away as New York City and Boston, as well as members of the local community, joined in a fireside ceremony mourning the history of Thanksgiving—a holiday created to celebrate the slaughter of Pequot Indians in Mystic, Connecticut—and honoring Native and Indigenous people, and all communities of struggle. Following the ceremony which included stories and songs from participants, those gathered enjoyed potluck and friendship.





¡Adelante Compañeros!

by Danny Malec, Former VPT Partner

Danny Malec was one of the first Partners of the current Voluntown Peace Trust. He recently left VPT and our community to follow his heart in New York City. So long, Comrade! We miss you!

Josephine Duveneck, one of the founders of Hidden Villa, a farm and education center in California, had this to say about the early days of starting an organization,

The pioneer days are the best days. I'm quite sure of that. In those first two years when we were all adventuring together, there was a heightened pulse to every hour of the day that was quite without parallel in most of our lives. To give everything you've got to one purpose, and to that purpose alone, insures a profound happiness; and when you do it in company with others it does really become a sort of exaltation.

I couldn't have described my experience in VPT any better—an exaltation of sorts—a time of intensity, challenge, companionship, grace, resilience, and lots of joy. As I look forward to life in New York and back on these three years, I am grateful for the journey that all of us who have contributed to VPT have taken together.

Harold, Mary and I, and later Patty, Kate and Steve, joined together with the VPT Board to build an education center for social change and sustainable living. Rooted in Gandhi's three elements of social change, we have sought to create a space conducive to: supporting processes for personal change to find healthier ways of being and relating; engaging in political action to challenge oppressive structures; and creating constructive programs to foster alternatives to those structures.

At the same time we have been committed to building intentional community. Working as a collective has been central to our vision for building peace with justice in this region. In this way, we commit to uprooting the traditional power structures, including patriarchy, hierarchy, and heteronormativity, from our way of life. As I wrote for a St. Francis House Newsletter in December 2005,

...We are more deeply realizing that the way we live our lives has as much to do with our ability to promote a just and sustainable way forward as our work for VPT. Thus, we have chosen a collectivist structure over a

hierarchical one. We make community and organizational decisions through consensus. We share resources. We support one another through our individual needs for spiritual growth, healing and transformation. We earn a poverty salary as a form of war tax resistance – as long as 50% of federal taxes go to war making, we refuse to pay. We seek ways to reduce our dependence on oil: growing more of our own food, reducing our energy consumption, and supporting local, organic agriculture and local economy.

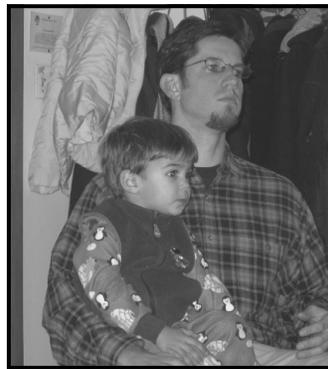
So we've had our heads, hands and hearts full over these years, as we've waded through the waters of

organizational development, community formation and maintaining the beautiful land where VPT resides. In so many ways, it seems that the work is only beginning...and now I am leaving.

I have wondered to myself how I can possibly leave, just as things are really starting to get going. But, as we each know, we can't control the stirrings of our heart and vocation. As the Hasidic saying goes, "everyone should carefully observe which way [their] heart draws [them] and then choose that way with all [their] strength." So, I am off to join Alys and Nico and to work with CASES (Center for Alternative Sentencing and Employment Services), a community justice organization.

Even as I contemplate this move, I return to this sense of gratitude and hope for my community and for VPT. I have been blessed to spend my final weeks in community, but not involved in the work. I've walked the land and given thanks for the beauty of this place, for the animals, birds, trees, gardens and stream. I've visited with friends from the local community. I've watched my community prepare for another year – to continue to pour their hearts and souls into the life and work of the Voluntown Peace Trust. I've even received the hospitality of my community as I retreated in Chuck's cabin. After all of this, I realize that as a community and an organization, we're starting to live into the mission and vision we've labored so hard to create. The organization is not only moving on without me, it is soaring into new and exciting terrain, and this fills me with gladness.

As I leave, I remember the words of my Nepali friend Debendra: "In my community, we don't say goodbye. We say 'See you.'" So, I'll be seeing you I look forward to the next time we meet. Until then, "¡Adelante Compañeros!" ☀



Danny with Nico at the Restorative Justice Potluck Presentation at which Danny shared about the field of restorative justice and his work with incarcerated youth.



EXCITING DEVELOPMENTS

THE GIFT THAT KEEPS ON GIVING

We inaugurated our root cellar (right) at last year's Harvest Party in September. Thanks especially to the efforts of our neighbor Jim MacBride, Former Partner Danny Malec and Former Intern Alvin Arnold, the old ne'er-used oil pit was converted into cold storage space for root vegetables. As a result, we've been gratefully enjoying the fruits of last summer's labors throughout the winter.



PAD OUR LARDER

Help us keep all our stores overflowing with bounty—make a donation today!

WEBSITE UPDATED

Thanks to a generous tuition donation from Lou Petrillo, VPT's Kate Foran (left) successfully completed a DreamWeaver design course and is now managing our website. While a complete redesign is still forthcoming, users can already find updated driving directions and rental rates, and further information on upcoming events and the work of VPT. Let us know what else you might like to see included.

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inaugurated it by eating a meal prepared entirely from ingredients found on these grounds. It was a wonderful reminder of the hospitality of this land, something we try to share with others. Indeed, we realize that even one generation removed from ours, nearly every city person had a connection to a working farm. Visitors from near and far have continuously expressed their hunger for that connection, and feel it with the Peace Farm.

The fact that our communities fail to live up to these values makes our collective efforts more necessary and more poignant (examples of the choice of hostility over hospitality include the recent racist incidents in neighboring Plainfield [see Newsbrief on p.3] and the Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids that have threatened undocumented immigrants in New Haven and Hartford). Hospitality on a political scale requires us to break down barriers, share space and resources, and cooperate. In an increasingly privatized and individualized culture, where front porches have been replaced by back decks and town commons have become mall food courts, the work of hospitality is the work of social transformation. ☀

WITH SINCERE GRATITUDE

Social change work is often behind-the-scenes and frequently thankless. Such is the case for the tireless efforts of our Board of Directors. We want to thank former board members Bob Brown, Liz McAlister, and Liz Woods, as well as Judie, Jim and Jackie who continue to show amazing commitment to VPT. The work of VPT is impossible without you.

Partners

Patricia Adams
Steve Borla
Harold Burns
Kate Foran
Mary Novak

Board of Directors

Judie McKenna, Chair
Jim Hubert, Treasurer
Jackie Allen-Doucot, Secretary



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The Mission of VPT

The Voluntown Peace Trust is a nonprofit education center dedicated to social change and sustainable living.

We offer programs, workshops, and retreats, as well as hospitality and resources, to people constructing alternatives to the violence of our age.

upcoming events

For more details, go to www.VoluntownPeaceTrust.org

Film Series

Theme: *People Power* • March 7, 28 & April 25
Potluck Dinner at 6pm • Film and Discussion at 7pm
\$5 Suggested Donation • RSVP Appreciated

Spring Workday

April 26 • 9am to 4pm • Lunch Included
Come join us for a host of spring projects, including felling trees, covering trails, and spring cleaning!

Camp Little Windows

Traditional Music Weekend • May 2-4
Small, personally oriented vocal classes invite participants to explore the rich heritage of folk music from Irish, Appalachian, and other traditional cultures.
Pre-registration required. Contact Julee Glaub at juleeglaub@aol.com

May Fundraiser

May Party and Plant Sale • May 24 • 10am—6pm
Join us for a celebratory beginning to the growing season!