

VOLUNTOWN PEACE TRUST, INC.

ANNUAL REPORT 2013 – 2014



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This year marks the 10th anniversary of the transfer of this property from Equity Trust to the new “Voluntown Peace Trust”. Voluntown Peace Trust was the name of the original trust created in 1962 when the land was purchased for the Community for Nonviolent Action. This past decade has been challenging, but we can celebrate many accomplishments. We have grown and stabilized the organization, and we are now in a stronger place to move into our next decade.

When the property was transferred from Equity Trust, VPT took on a debt of \$475,000, an enormous amount of money for a new organization. In the past 10 years we have reduced our debt to less than \$75,000, through a lot of hard work fundraising, organizing special events, and renting the facilities. By our 10th anniversary on July 6, we will have paid off the Mercy Investment Program loan, and refinanced the Cooperative Fund of New England's loan with Francis Fund for Southeastern Connecticut at a lower interest rate. The Isabel and Russell Smith Trust loan is in the process of being turned into a grant. We are grateful to Isabel Smith for her generosity and to the Hartford

Catholic Worker for passing this generosity along to VPT. All of our lenders made a leap of faith in supporting our shared vision of a more just and peaceful world.

Five years ago we became a membership organization, increasing the number of people involved. And now that we are in a position to do so, the members and board have been developing exciting plans as we move into the next decade.

During the past decade we have made needed repairs to several buildings and systems, and improvements such as the second floor fire exit at Ahimsa. With lower loan payments, we will now be able to use our funds to make capital improvements as we make VPT a more sustainable center. Plans include a major renovation of Swann-Corrie that will provide more space for groups, and solar panels to create our own electricity.

We have organized many events, too numerous to mention here. Improved facilities will mean better space for groups and an ability to offer the center to more groups. We take seriously our mission to “serve as an educational, resource and support center dedicated to nonviolent social change and sustainable living.” We enter into our next decade focused on bringing more people together at the Voluntown Peace Trust for that purpose.

Volunteers make what we do possible.

Many thanks to Voluntown Boy Scout Troop 74, working on their community service badges at VPT with scout leader and VPT member Bryan Armstrong. They have cleaned up the Peace Garden, enlarged the garden by the Farmhouse back door, and helped create the Yellow Submarine Garden. (The propane tank was painted by another group of young people.) They raked and cleared around Ahimsa, along the path from the front side to Ahimsa and back to the field, and weeded the Labyrinth. They also repaired the garden fence.

A special thanks to Caretaker Nancy Kwasnik and her daughters Stella and Carissa. Nancy has worked to bring many local people onto the property, and to welcome those who come to use the facilities.

REPORTS FROM VPT'S THREE PRINCIPLE PROGRAM AREAS:

The Cooperative for Nonviolent Action

The Dedication of the Yurt took place at our Annual Meeting on June 1, 2013. The program included music, storytelling, history and plans for more sustainable housing at VPT.

On October 5th, the Labyrinth Dedication and fundraiser to honor the memory Emmett Jarrett took place. Our friends at St. Francis House created a special issue of their *Troubadour* newsletter, dedicated to Emmett and VPT. The dedication was well-attended.

Hands Off Appalachia Action Camp, scheduled for Nov. 18-25 turned into two weeks when 14 people were arrested at their nonviolent action on the 25th and remained at VPT the following week. They provided a speaker for Nature Connection on mountaintop removal coal mining.

Songs of Freedom & Struggle – Bringing It All Back Home - Geoff Kaufman, Charlie King and Karen Brandow performed at All Souls' Friday Night Folk Concert on January 17, co-sponsored by VPT. On the February 22nd, VPT hosted a Songs of Freedom and Struggle gathering that included workshops and song swaps.. The very successful and well-attended day included Remembering Pete: A Seeger Singalong, an historical performance “It Isn't Nice: A History of Nonviolence in the U.S.” by Charlie King and Marcia Taylor, ending with dinner and a round robin song fest.

The SECT Peace & Justice Network continued their film series at Bean & Leaf in New London showing four films in the fall of 2013 and three in the spring of 2014.

CNVA set up tables to promote VPT at many events throughout the region, including the Norwich NAACP's 25th Annual Juneteenth Day and events at the Dragon's Egg.

Future Plans – On October 25th we will honor Marjorie Swann, one of the founders of CNVA, who died in March. It is the 50th anniversary of CNVA's first protests against the Vietnam War, and we will kick-off events that bring together veterans and opponents of war.

October 10-12 WRL is organizing a Training for Nonviolence Trainers program.

CNVA has a goal of bringing in new organizational members in the coming year. We will also make the Songs of Freedom & Struggle an annual gathering..

The Hartford Catholic Worker

In 2013 the Hartford Catholic Worker (HCW) welcomed a total of 40 children from North Hartford (65 % were African American and 28% were Latina/o) to Ahimsa for a week, and sometimes longer, of swimming, fishing, hiking, camp fires, nonviolent conflict resolution and community building. Pursuant to the desire of one of our major funders (The Hartford Fund for Public Giving) we also purchased twenty books about nature, fish and fishing, and scary stories to read to and with the children in an effort to mitigate literacy losses over the summer. In addition to the 40 grade school-aged children, we also welcomed 6 teenaged children from North Hartford who received a modest stipend to help us with cooking, cleaning, and interacting with the younger children.

Aside from our use of Ahimsa during July and August we also welcomed about 70 young people to the Muste Center in December for our annual Christmas party. We were grateful that VPT neighbors Lavender Hill Farms brought by a couple of their Alpacas for the kids to pet.

In 2013 HCW provided VPT with \$5000 for the use of Ahimsa in July and August and \$250 for the use of Muste for our Christmas party. We also made contributions of food and money to the caretaker in recognition of her help to us. We also continued with our pledge to do a deep cleaning of Ahimsa in the spring and at the end of the summer. 2013 also marks the end of the 10-year commitment made by the founding donors we solicited for support when we sought financing to buy the property from Equity Trust. Though several of the donors did not completely honor their pledge, most did. We are very grateful for their generosity and their confidence. Please note that for 2014 HCW has paid VPT \$6000 ahead of schedule in order to help pay for the second floor fire exit from Ahimsa.

Land Stewards

In addition to participating in year-round maintenance-all-sorts, Land Stewards contributed to cleaning up the area, doing weeding and planting to prepare for the dedication of the Labyrinth on October 5, 2013.

We sponsored Seeding a Post-Capitalist Future: Capitalism is Bust; What's Next? October 25, 2013. Pot luck, videos & discussion.

Land Stewards assisted as hosts in set-up and clean-up for Jeremy Scahill's Dirty Wars on Saturday, May 3rd. Potluck followed by movie.

May 10, 2014 tag sale: We laughed, we walked, we talked ... we cleaned up and got rid of a lot of "stuff", and folks got good deals!...Oh! the take? We made \$287.00!

The Nature Connection Program resumed in the fall of 2013, but Nancy Kwasnik decided in the spring of 2014 to run the program through the Red Tail Learning Center in New London and to use to Arboretum at CONN College which is free to keep the cost of the program to a minimum.

The mowing has become a burden that Land Stewards are unable to maintain.

THE FOLLOWING ARE SUMMARIES OF STANDING COMMITTEE REPORTS FROM THE YEAR:

Operations and Personnel Report:

This year we changed our contract with our resident caretaker Nancy Kwasnik to be congruent with the calendar year. Therefore the current six month agreement runs through the end of June and we propose renewing that agreement on the same basis from July-December, 2014. With the board meeting on an every-other-month schedule, we have tried to meet with Nancy before each board meeting in order to review work done and any concerns that she might have. We intend to continue this pattern and to develop a check list for each building. We also worked with Nancy to find a solution to the public view of the side area of the farmhouse from the road so that bikes and outdoor equipment would be screened from view.

We are also responsible for agreements with all residents on the property. Nick Katkevich has concluded his term on residency in Chuck's Cabin. We have entered into a new agreement with Rose Bissonette for the use of Chuck's Cabin, extending through the end of 2014. Rose will vacate her residence when we have full property rentals.

Part of the responsibility of Operations is to arrange training opportunities for board and membership on Consensus Decision Making and Conflict Resolution in alternating years. Since last year the focus has been on capacity building for the board so our plan for this year is to provide a training to develop strong committees and consensus decision making in the fall of 2014.

Facilities - Ahimsa had 10 feet of new sill installed and new French doors mounted and now the second floor fire exit is completed. The Farmhouse had a thorough energy audit performed. Many doors had insulated foam strips and sweeps attached, closing off wasteful hot air feeds, and an interior door was installed to block off cold air migration. Also, a new kitchen sink faucet was installed in the Farmhouse. Going forward, a priority is the ceiling and skylights in Muste. David Opperman is the point person for this work. There was a meeting to address the deterioration of the Danbury, which houses the pump and equipment. No decisions have been made on this.

Membership - It was great to see our membership swell to 40+ after the membership drive of summer of 2012. However, most of our new members, including long-time friends of VPT, did not become more involved in committee work and maintenance of the property. A membership drive was not conducted in the summer of 2013. Without the membership drive, 23 people renewed membership. Of these 23 members, 17 have been very involved. This leads Nancy MacBride, Membership convener, to believe that many people pay their yearly dues as a support of VPT's mission and work not because they wish to become more involved. We are grateful that VPT has several new members who are very involved. Perhaps this is how VPT will grow- slow and steady.

VPT's small core of members worked together to make events to which members and others are invited. This year's highlights were: The Emmett Jarrett Labyrinth Dedication and Songs of Freedom and Struggle. Other membership-aided events: "Contaminated Without Consent" film, speaker and discussion, and the movie "Dirty Wars". It appears that speakers and activities draw more interest than potluck/movie nights.

Nancy MacBride is willing to work with members to develop events for VPT members, and plans on conducting a membership drive in the summer of 2014.

Finance – Tina DuBosque continues to work closely with Treasurer Jen Caruso and our bookkeeper Cheryl Musser to finally reorganize our bookkeeping process, the end goal of which is to produce Board reporting that is correct and easy to digest. In addition, reports are sent to lenders as well as year-end tax reporting. Tina will be working with the Treasurer and Chair on marketing plans for VPT rentals and events, and hopes that others will come forward to help with this work.

Communications – Prior to the December 2013 annual fund appeal mailing Tina DuBosque updated the mailing list and formatted the appeal. Throughout the year she added names to both the mailing list and email list. In May, Tina handed most of the Communications responsibilities to Kathleen Rowe who was willing to take on the tasks and who Tina feels will do a great job. Tina will continue as webmaster until Kathleen feels ready to take over that responsibility as well. There will be major updates to the website in 2014. Kathleen will publicize your event – get your info into yptcomm@gmail.com at least 2 weeks before the event date. Hilary Opperman is the point person for the Facebook page. We have had a closed group Facebook page for several years and we now have an open one as well. We need to use them more for outreach.

2013 – 2014 Voluntown Peace Trust Board:

Joanne Sheehan (Chair, Member Rep)

Chris Doucot (Vice-Chair, Hartford Catholic Worker)

Jennifer Caruso (Treasurer)

Nancy MacBride (Secretary, Member Rep, Membership Committee convener)

Janet Minella-Didier (Cooperative for Nonviolent Action)

David Opperman (Member Rep, Facilities Committee convener)

Peter Nightingale (Land Stewards) Peter replaced Jim MacBride in December