

2015 ANNUAL REPORT

Susan Dreyer-Leon, President; Claire Stanley, Guiding Teacher; Judy Coven, Treasurer; Paula Swenson, Secretary; Alison Taylor, Board member; Petria Mitchell, Board member; Doug Wessel, Board member

Ten years of the Dharma at Vermont Insight Meditation Center

The Wheel of the Dharma has kept rolling on locally here in Brattleboro and further afield to most States in New England. A strong local commitment to the practice and to study is maintained at the Center and many visitors come to attend daylong retreats or special events from as far as away as Boston and upper state New York, New Hampshire and Massachusetts. Vermont Insight now serves as hub for Dharma offerings that are not offered at other Dharma centers in New England. Our unique offerings continue to be weekly silent meditation sittings at Neighbors' Hall led by practice leaders; Sunday sangha sittings with either a teacher and formal Dharma teaching or a practice leader-led silent sitting; formal courses during the Fall, Winter, Spring and Summer; and daylong meditation retreats or special guest events.

The Tenth anniversary of Vermont Insight was blessed with several celebrations. The official date when we received the 501c3 approval from the Federal Government, making VIMC a non-profit religious organization, was August 1, 2005. Therefore, on August 1, 2015, there was a quiet recognition and expression of gratitude among the teachers and the Board of Directors.

Two public celebrations took place in November. On Sunday November 1st, a group of about twenty gathered with their partners and friends to recall the history of VIMC and to share a meal. Claire Stanley, Guiding Teacher, Jack Millett, Cheryl Wilfong, and Manny Mansbach and current Board members as well as founding members (Claire, Jack, Cheryl and Drew Kovach) and past Board members joined together to mark the occasion. The delicious catered Thai meal was followed by a historical retrospective of the organization from its beginning concept to the weekly meetings that led to the first Introduction to Meditation offering, to the submission of the 501c3 documents and the approval. Each person who had served in one capacity or another at Vermont Insight offered her or his perspective on the development of the organization and its meaning in their lives. It was a wonderful inspiring evening!

The second event that marked the Anniversary was the "Afternoon with Stephen Batchelor" at the Centre Congregational Church. While this event attracted fewer attendees than had Joseph Goldstein for our Fifth Anniversary and Sharon Salzberg in 2014, we nonetheless found the audience to be quite receptive to Batchelor and the discussion after his talk was lively and enthusiastic. A different kind of person attended the event – more scholars and notably teachers and students from many different Buddhist groups in the area. Everyone who attended gave accolades to Batchelor and to VIMC for hosting the event.

In 2015, on the "Daily Dharma" level, VIMC continued to offer silent sitting meditation three mornings a week, a Dharma Friends group on Wednesday evenings, Sunday sittings every week, eight Daylong Retreats, and the now popular May "Commitment to Practice" month.

In 2015, practice leaders began to meet with Claire on a quarterly basis to discuss the role and possible new ways in which the practice leaders could support the VIMC sangha. Out of the first meeting, the Friday night sitting evolved. This has been a very successful VIMC offering with up to 10 people attending on any given Friday night from 5:30 – 6:15. A bow of gratitude to Drew

Kovach, Rose O'Connor, Fiona Cook, Mary Mathias, and Paul Rodrigue for holding the space for the morning sits and now for this new Friday evening sitting.

A drop in course offerings in 2015 was due to low enrollment and cancellations. VIMC offered 13 courses Mondays through Thursdays, mornings and evenings. The newest offering, the non-residential weekend retreat, was offered in April and was attended by ten dedicated students and four teachers. The practice was seamless and steady with instructions for carrying on with the practice in the midst of life. All who attended were in favor of offering this kind of retreat again in 2016.

Another new offering from Vermont Insight in 2015 was the new Dharma Friends group forming around parents of young children and parenting. Paul Rodrigue spearheaded a group of three parents who, along with Paul as the liaison for Vermont Insight, began a program in October with the commitment to meet monthly, to build spiritual community, and to discuss the following possible topics: Dharma practice in daily life, compassion and joy in parenting, working with strong emotions, balancing demands of family with practice, skillful communication and co-parenting, and mindfulness for children. The initial meeting was so well attended that a larger venue was found for the following month.

With this report submitted by Claire Stanley, Guiding Teacher for Vermont Insight, it seems that the Dharma offerings continue to flourish here thanks to all of the teachers, the practice leaders and the students.

Administrative Support Team Committee

The administrative team includes: Rose O'Connor, bank deposits and mail; Cheryl Baxley, outgoing registrar; Marilyn Odeh, incoming registrar; Doug Wessel, data base manager; Paula Swenson, newsletter and website coordination with Anne McKinsey and liaison to Elaine Johnson; Claire Stanley, course description development; Fiona Cook, event flyer development and distribution; and Alison Taylor, mail and bank deposit back-up.

In 2015 the biggest change in the Administrative Support Team happened when Cheryl Baxley stepped down after over two years of generous service as registrar and those duties shifted seamlessly to Marilyn Odeh. Cheryl provided Marilyn with training and support and in November, Marilyn began responding to telephone and e-mail messages, registering people for courses and retreats, sending participant lists to teachers, maintaining a database of course enrollments, and keeping records of PayPal payments. Paula Swenson agreed to be the back-up to the registrar. Claire Stanley said, "This is a very important role at VIMC and I am delighted that we have found someone so competent as Marilyn and willing to take on the role."

Now is a good time to express our deep gratitude to Cheryl Baxley for her years of support of Vermont Insight as the registrar. She worked beautifully with Rose and with Claire and we are grateful for the spirit in which she offered her support to VIMC.

In an effort to look ahead to updating our website and streamlining our registration process for courses and retreats, Doug Wessel researched possible systems that might be a good fit for VIMC. Based on Doug's research, which included recommendations from other sanghas, the board agreed to engage the services of Alden Gannon, who conducted a "Discovery" process. After Alden had interviewed board members, teachers and members of the administrative team, he created a report, with recommendations, which included updating our website to make it mobile compatible

and either installing a comprehensive management system, which Alden had created especially for other sanghas, or using an add-on program like Event Espresso to manage our registration process. Alden's program is being successfully used by several much larger sanghas, but the Board felt it to be too expensive for our small sangha. At this point it was decided to work with our Web Developer, Anne McKinsey, on updating the website and Paula Swenson committed to figuring out how to put Event Espresso on the website. Alden was retained for support on an as needed basis. By the end of 2015, Paula was ready to begin implementing the free version of the Event Espresso management system for events going forward in 2016 and Anne McKinsey had submitted a proposal for a website update. Research continues into ways to streamline the database.

Anne McKinsey continued to maintain and update our website during 2015. In the fall she added a Compassionate Action page to the website highlighting two volunteer opportunities: providing a dharma movie and discussion at the Cheshire Correctional Facility and preparing and serving dinners for the Winter Overflow Shelter.

Paula Swenson publishes the newsletter each week, and beginning in November, the newsletter sign-up process was streamlined by adding an online sign-up form. Roger Wilkins continues to send the VIMC calendar information from the newsletter to the Brattleboro Reformer. In October, VIMC received additional publicity with an ad in the Brattleboro Literary Festival program through a generous donation from Drew Kovach and the graphic art talent of his daughter, Sarah Kovach. Thank you Drew and Sarah! Fiona Cook continued to produce flyers and coordinate the distribution of them throughout the area.

During the winter months, Alison Taylor and Mary Mathias filled in making the bank deposits and checking the mail at the post office and at the box at Neighbors Hall, while Rose O'Connor was recuperating and in the spring was able to take back these tasks. The administrative team kept Vermont Insight running smoothly. A deep bow of gratitude to all who serve in their different capacities for the Admin Team!

Submitted by Claire Stanley and Paula Swenson

Sangha Development Committee

The current Sangha Development committee consists of Mary Mathias, Cheryl Wilfong, Fiona Cook and Board member, Alison Taylor.

The committee meets every six to eight weeks to plan activities and events that are informal, fun, and social. Its mission is to offer Sangha members opportunities to connect with others for whom meditation and the dharma are important aspects of life.

As in years past, events include pot luck suppers, kayak outings, woodland hikes, and the winter monthly movie nights at the Marlboro Graduate Center, which include discussion. A twist on the traditional potluck this summer was "A Potluck with a Purpose." The participants discussed the catastrophic earthquake in Nepal and learned about sites that were set up to gather and distribute charitable contributions.

While the committee is committed to its mission, it is somewhat discouraging that participation has been low for all the events offered and well publicized in the newsletter. This trend correlates with information gathered in last year's sangha survey: while people are happy to know that these social

offerings are “out there,” and would like to get involved at some point, their busy lives keep them from participating.

The Sangha Development committee has discussed the need to tap younger members to serve on the committee and will, likely, advertise this opportunity/need in upcoming newsletters.

On a brighter note, sangha development is definitely happening in other ways at VIMC. Sunday Sits have attracted more and more participants and the teachers have expanded the format to include more group interaction. People are getting to meet each other while sharing in a directed yet social arena. In addition, the Set-Up Committee sets a welcoming and friendly tone each Sunday by greeting each participant, orienting them to the space if they are new and introducing them to the teacher. These efforts seem to be successful in growing the Sunday morning programs. We need to recognize, as well, that the rich array of course offerings meets the social “dharma friends” needs of many.

Further sangha development is and will be happening in two new arenas: the Parents and Children’s Program started by former Board President, Paul Rodrigue, and three parents and The Young Adult Program, about to be launched by teacher Manny Mansbach.

Submitted by Alison Taylor

Compassionate Action

While the committee structure envisioned by the Board is up and running in a number of key areas, it is not yet in others. A formal Compassionate Action Committee was launched in 2015 but lost momentum with the inability of its leader to continue the initiative. A formal Compassionate Action Committee remains a goal for the Board to address in the coming year.

However, in keeping with VIMC’s mission, we have engaged in local compassionate action initiatives. We continued in 2015 to support the Winter Overflow Shelter Dinner Program sponsored by Groundworks Collaborative and housed at First Baptist Church. VIMC, supported by approximately twenty of its sangha members or more loosely affiliated supporters, provided the nightly meal once a month from November through April.

In addition, the Board committed funds to help support two community charitable organizations: Groundworks Collaborative and The Brattleboro Heat Fund.

Set-Up Committee

In 2015, the Set-Up Committee consisted of five committed volunteers who have served for many years: Mary Mathias, Margaret Wilson, Paula Swenson, Chris Arietta and Alison Taylor.

The job of this committee is to set up and clean up Neighbors Hall for Sunday programs—the 10:00-12:00 sits and the Day-Long programs which run from 10:00-4:00 once a month and include setting up the Mansion kitchen for tea. In addition, the Set-Up Committee records the number of participants each week, collects and delivers the dharma offerings for the Center and for the teacher and informs VIMC’s Treasurer if additional funds are needed to meet our financial commitment to visiting teachers.

The Set-Up Committee also serves the function of greeters to incoming participants, orienting newcomers to our space and seating options and introducing them to the teacher who is leading that morning's program. This role serves an aspect of sangha development!

A new addition to Neighbors Hall, initiated by the Set-Up Committee, is the basket of blankets and shawls available to participants which is very much appreciated during the winter months.

A plan for the future, in conjunction with the Facilities Committee, is to add shelving to the vestibule to hold shoes.

The Set-Up Committee would like to recognize and thank two "unofficial" members—Betty Phillips and Rose O'Connor who continue to help on Sunday mornings.

Submitted by Alison Taylor

Facilities Committee

Paul Rodrigue, Cheryl Wilfong, Linsey Doolittle, and Margaret Barletta

The Facilities Committee has been active behind the scenes throughout 2015. We were considering two variant perspectives. One was to make Solar Hill a more pleasant and complete place to practice. We addressed this in a variety of ways. We improved signage to especially help newcomers orient themselves in the space. We reorganized the cabinets where the cushions are kept so it's easier to store and access them. We cleaned the cushions one summer Sunday after sitting, a practice we think should become an annual event. We consulted with Elaine Johnson, our landlord, about two features of the space that are denying accessibility for some sangha members. One feature is the mildew/mold odor that has been chronic at Neighbors Hall. In response, Elaine installed a fresh air circulation system that noticeably reduced the odor problem. The problem isn't eliminated and so some people likely are still kept away by this presence, but the reduction has been a noticeable improvement. The other feature is lack of handicap accessibility. While the building has a handicap ramp attached, that ramp is not accessible to people in a wheelchair, so is practically rendered useless. Elaine had a conversation with one of her maintenance workers who offered suggestions, but no work was done and so this problem continues to be a limiting factor for some members of the sangha. The most recent work the committee has been addressing is the library. We've expanded our available space for books by adding one large bookshelf to the hall, and have increased the number of books that can be borrowed by sangha members. More books will be added soon, and we expect that within the next couple of months our library will have more than doubled in size! It's worth noting that a non-committee member, Alison Taylor, provided her own useful contribution to the cause by generously donating a variety of blankets that are now used frequently by people for warmth during cold season gatherings.

The second topic we started to consider is the gathering of information about other spaces that could provide an alternative to VIMC's current home space. This effort is intended to provide the Board of Directors with data about potential options and both their benefits and costs. This data could help guide the Board for future decisions should they want to consider a new home for VIMC. Initial efforts to gather data were difficult and unsuccessful. This task remains on our "to do" list.

Submitted by Paul Rodrigue

Finance Committee

Judy Coven, Mary Mathias, Cheryl Wilfong, and Lawrence Williams.

The responsibilities of the Finance Committee are to oversee the financial stability of the organization, to provide support for the Treasurer, to consider issues raised by the Board related to VIMC finances, and to make financial recommendations to the Board as appropriate. This year committee members included the current treasurer (Judy Coven), two former treasurers (Cheryl Wilfong and Mary Mathias), and our former volunteer bookkeeper (Lawrence Williams) who served for a year of much appreciated service before retiring from the committee.

The committee began the year by making recommendations to the Board in preparation for budget planning for 2015.

It also investigated how best to invest VIMC's \$20,000 reserve fund which the Board agreed to initiate last year, and it made a recommendation to the Board to invest in rolling CD's (90 day, 6 month, and 12 month). Once approved by the Board, the committee found the best rates available and opened these three CD accounts.

After committee discussion and upon its recommendation, the Board agreed to try closed dana boxes to replace dana baskets at Neighbors Hall. New boxes were used with mixed results. Data is now being collected to determine next steps.

The committee recommended to the Board and the Board agreed that after 10 years daylong registration rates should be raised from \$15 to \$20. These new rates went into effect on January 1, 2016.

Submitted by Judy Coven

VIMC Financial Report for 2015

VIMC ended 2014 in a strong financial position, with an end of the year surplus and enough assets to be able to establish a significant reserve fund. As a result, the Board felt it was able to commit additional financial support for our guiding teacher's ongoing education as well as to initiate financial retreat assistance for all of our teachers. In addition it committed new funds to help upgrade our technology.

The Board is grateful to the sangha for its continued generous financial support of our annual and spring appeals. This support is so important to these efforts and to the continued vitality of the organization. Both the annual appeal and the generous support of a stable group of sustaining donors provide necessary funds for VIMC's operating expenses, and our spring appeal provides financial support for our guiding teacher's ongoing education.

During a year of increased expenses and a small decrease in course registrations, the generous support of our appeals, along with our sangha's participation in our many and varied offerings, allowed VIMC to end the year with only a very small loss. The Board plans to initiate new fund raising efforts in 2016 so that VIMC's growth, vitality, and financial stability can be ensured.

Income and Expenses for 2015

Sources of Income:

Sitting dana, spring appeal, annual appeal, movie nights, course registrations, daylong retreat registrations, sustaining supporters, gifts, special events.

Total Income 2015: \$25,738.

Expenses:

Bookkeeper, charitable gifts, liability insurance, rents, office expenses, Paypal fees, postage and post office box, telephone and internet, website development and maintenance, guiding teacher health and education, teacher and retiring board member retreat assistance, visiting teacher support, special events.

Total Expenses 2015: \$26,251

NET LOSS 2015: \$513

Submitted by Judy Coven, Treasurer

Board of Trustees

2015 has been a year of transitions for the Board of Trustees. We had two scheduled departures, Secretary, Fiona Cook and President, Paul Rodriugue. We are deeply indebted to both Paul and Fiona for exemplary service to VIMC in a crucial period of growth and development for the organization. Luckily, we were able to enlist the active participation of two new board members, Paula Swenson and Doug Wessel, both of whom jumped in with two feet to lend much needed expertise to our website, registration and data-base upgrades. Paula also took over as Board Secretary and Doug will be stepping into the Treasurer's job in March of 2016. Susan Dreyer Leon took on the President's role.

On a less lucky note, valued member, Rick Willhite had to unexpectedly step away from the Board early in the year and we were unable to replace him in spite of significant outreach efforts. We are very optimistic that we will be able to replace his position in 2016 in addition to replacing Judy Coven, whose six year term will be expiring this summer. Again, we are so lucky to have had Judy's stabilizing and attentive presence for this time and are particularly grateful to her for her most recent role as Board Treasurer.

2015 marked our second full year using our all-volunteer committee structure for daily operations and organization of our Sangha. In spite of several critical personnel shifts noted above, especially on the Administrative team, the organization has continued to function quite smoothly and both routine and special events now seem well within our range of competency. We are not naïve, however, about the amount of time and energy it takes for everything to flow and we continue to reach out to the Sangha to provide both on-going and as needed volunteer support. On the Board's agenda for 2016 is a revisiting of our organizational structure and an identification of any gaps and/or needs that should be considered as we continue to grow.

A very exciting development for VIMC this year was the establishment of a Dedicated Fund for our organization at the Vermont Community Foundation. This fund can be added to over time and is intended to function as a source of reliable income and endowment for the Center. The Board is still working on getting information about the new fund onto the website, but we are excited to

begin working on further securing our future as an enduring feature of the Buddhist practice center landscape in the region.

Again this year a generous anonymous donor facilitated our participation in the Insight InterSangha Meeting in California. Doug Wessel attended from our Board and returned with a lot of interesting ideas, not the least of which was a new report titled "Teacher Transition in the Insight Movement." This excellent piece of research gives a portrait of growing sanghas around the country and how they are working with issues like governance, sustainability, and teacher training and transition. The Board and teachers hope to take up this discussion in the coming year, but at first glance, it appears that VIMC is on excellent footing. Our existing governance structures, organizational integrity, and financial stability are significant accomplishments and provide us with a very strong foundation for future growth.

Finally, we recognize that one of our next significant areas of growth needs to be in fundraising. As is referenced in the Treasurer's report above, we are, for the second year in a row, going to be operating with a deficit budget. Although the deficit is small and we have a carry over surplus that allows us to be more risk tolerant, the fact remains that our needs now outpace our reliable annual income. For several years, we have struggled to find sangha and Board members who feel experienced enough and/or have the time to launch a dedicated fund raising committee. This year, we acknowledge the essential need for such a committee and Susan Dreyer Leon will lead the effort to get it off the ground this spring. We need to understand what the real carrying capacity of the community and the organization are in terms of additional fund raising, and we need to know whether we can reliably fund raise several thousand additional dollars each year. If we find that we can, then we can confidently continue to budget for growth. If not, then we will need to revisit our budget priorities for 2017 and make sure that we can meet our obligations responsibly without running a deficit.

As we grow into our 11th year as an organization, we know that VIMC is providing an essential spiritual home for many of our Sangha members. It is an honor and a privilege to be able to do so. We hope that the efforts of our Board will continue to serve to benefit all members of our community and all beings everywhere.

Submitted by Susan Dreyer Leon, Board President