

DWELLING IN THE WOODS HISTORY FOR ARCHIVES

1989-2001

The Dwelling in The Woods was founded in 1989 by three Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, Christine Loegering, Jeanne Stodola and Susan Neisen. Jeanne and Chris had a dream and invited other sisters to join them. The sisters wanted to create a place where individuals could spend time in solitude, quieting the mind and opening the heart for spiritual wholeness. They recognized the need of people living in a speed driven society to be able to retreat to a quiet, nurturing space in order to get in touch with themselves and deepen their relationship with the divine. Chris, Susan and Jeanne went through a lengthy process with their Province Leadership Team and eventually were affirmed in their desire to create a Hermitage Retreat. It would be called “The Dwelling in The Woods” and would be incorporated as a non-profit Retreat Center, guided by its own Board of Directors. The Sisters of St. Joseph would contribute the services of the three sisters and would provide a stipend for their living expenses.

The sisters began discerning what their first steps would be. As part of this discernment they made a commitment to follow any idea that came to their minds, trusting the Spirit to guide them and the beginnings of The Dwelling. When the name of a friend out of the distant past kept coming to mind, they decided to approach him and ask him to be a fund-raiser for the Hermitage. After listening to the whole story over dinner, he said he could not ask other people for money but that he himself would donate the land for the Hermitage. He told the sisters to let him know when they found what they thought would be a suitable place.

With the help of a Real Estate agency, the sisters found a piece of land for sale in the heart of the Solana State Forest in McGrath, MN, just two hours north of the Twin Cities. It seemed perfect. It felt peaceful, it was secluded and it was very beautiful. On June 25, 1988, the feast of St. John the Baptist, this 120 acres of land was purchased for \$55,000. A small log house, a pole barn and a wood burning sauna were on the property at the time of purchase. The log house became the sister’s residence and until 1995 it was used as a gathering space for guests. “Hermits” shared the house with the sisters for meals, showers, meditation, yoga, spiritual direction, therapeutic massage, library and gift shop.

The land was nine miles into the Diocese of Duluth. As a courtesy, the leadership team of the Sisters of St. Joseph sent a letter of introduction to Bishop Schwietz the bishop of Duluth. Sisters Jeanne, Chris and Susan also introduced themselves by letter and invited the Bishop to come for a visit. In 1989, a founding Board of Directors was established for The Dwelling in The Woods and with the Board in place, the Deed for the land was received and non-profit status was finally granted by the State. This was happy news and enabled the sisters to move forward with fund raising efforts.

Although The Dwelling began with a significant amount of land there was little or no money in the bank. One of the founding Board members donated \$700 to be used for advertising The Hermitage. Property taxes and fees for the filing of the Deed were due and totalled \$695. The advertising money along with the \$25 the Dwelling had in the bank just covered the expenses. Advertising was put on hold. An unexpected Christmas gift of \$500 from St. John's Catholic Church in Excelsior came just in time to cover the taxes for the second year.

Excavation of three and a half acres began in the summer of 1990. On October 12, the sisters hosted an Open House. One hermitage was complete, the second just begun. Two hundred people attended the occasion including a bus load of sisters from St. Joseph's Provincial House and Bethany. When invited to stay for the Ceremony of Blessing, the sisters graciously declined saying that they needed to get back for 5:00 prayer!

The Dwelling welcomed its first guest to "The Loft" hermitage on Thanksgiving of 1990. Two more hermitages, "The Meadows" and "The Birches" were completed by fall of 1991. Done in pine and cedar, each hermitage was simple and welcoming, with a wood burning stove, half-bath or shower, a cooktop stove, refrigerator, an easy chair, table and a comfortable futon for sleeping. A large bay window brought nature into the room. During these years, with the help of many volunteers, a screened gazebo was built, a small pond excavated and a camp ground was developed.

In the summer of 1991, after much discernment, Susan Neisen came to the decision to leave The Dwelling and return to her work in the cities. Patrick Mulvehill, a psychologist from the Twin Cities, heard of The Dwelling and came to discuss being a part-time staff member. He joined The Dwelling that summer, lived in a small trailer home in the woods and helped with all that needed to be done including cooking, leading meditation, keeping up the grounds and being a Board member as well. At this point, as they so often had in the past, the sisters again felt a strong sense that The Dwelling was continuously being guided and cared for. There were many ups and downs, many discouragements and losses. But the Spirit was felt to be truly present in all circumstances and events. The sisters trusted this beyond a doubt and found peace at the heart of all things.

As The Dwelling grew, many generous people came forward to volunteer their help and in 1992 a group called "Saturday Volunteers" was formed. On the first Saturday of each month these volunteers would come to help with anything that needed to be done - building projects, landscaping, gardening of flowers, vegetables and herbs, blazing walking trails in the woods and doing painting, staining and other major maintenance projects. A second group of Volunteers, "City Link", also developed. This group met four times a year at Carondelet Center to do bulk mailing of The Dwelling newsletter. They were also available to do any other tasks which could be done in the cities, such as baking, phoning and distributing Dwelling brochures.

In 1993, through a grant from The Giving Board of the Sisters of St. Joseph, the sisters were able to hire a part-time cook. They also announced plans for laying the foundations of two more hermitages. These would be snuggled in the woods. However, an access trail into the State Forest and on Dwelling property passed directly in front of the new hermitage sites. After three years of negotiations with the Township Board, the DNR and lawyers for all concerned parties the Section Road was closed to the public. This meant that hunters would no longer be allowed to use the trail as an access to the woods and Dwelling property would be private and safe year round.

Construction of the next hermitage began on April 8, 1994. It was a one-story hermitage with a shower and was designed for double or single occupancy. Originally it was planned to be used as a private residence for the sisters. However, because requests for use of the hermitages were so great, the sisters decided to remain in the Jog house and the new structure became Hermitage 4, "The Woodlands".

In the summer of 1995, The Dwelling received a grant of \$35,000 from the Partners in Justice Fund of the Sisters of St. Joseph. The grant was designated to be used for the construction of an expanded space which would be in the shape of an octagon. "The Octagon" would provide an adequate place for seminars, for meditation and with the exception of meals, for all the other services which the sisters were continuing to offer in their small log house. The central pillar for The Octagon was placed at the center of a vortex of positive ley lines, (energy lines in the earth), which the sisters had determined by using their dowsing rods. This center vortex became the center of the prayer space in the main gathering room of The Octagon. It was with much joy and gratitude to the many donors who made it possible, that The Octagon was opened for use in the Fall of 1996.

Through the years, The Saturday Volunteers continued to give of their time and talents. They spent the Fall of 1998 emptying and taking down the old pole barn, piece by piece and plank by plank. The sisters announced that plans for construction of Hermitage 5 and for a staff residence near the east woods had begun. The slab for an office/garage/laundry space was being laid where the pole barn used to be. But a difficult, "blessing-in-disguise" event occurred. In applying for the building permit the sisters were notified that The Dwelling needed a license to serve food to the public. Aitkin County had never stipulated this in the previous nine years. Becoming licensed meant that the kitchen of the log house needed to be greatly expanded or a new kitchen/dining room space had to be built. It was decided that a kitchen/dining room be added to the plans for the office building. This put an enormous and unforeseen financial stress on The Dwelling.

In the 1999 Spring issue of The Dwelling newsletter, "In Touch With", the sisters shared the news that the new hermitage had been completed. On March 11, the final nails had been pounded, curtains had been hung and the simple furnishings were all in place. The fifth hermitage was ready for use. The Saturday Volunteers named it "The Tree Lodge". Nestled

in the woods, it offered a beautiful view of the forest from its second story. The first floor was like the other hermitages having a kitchenette, bed, bathroom and shower. But on the second floor were two private bedrooms, a semi-private sleeping space, a small sitting area and a bathroom with shower. The Tree Lodge was not a hermitage in the strict sense of the word since it was designed to accommodate up to six people. It was first occupied on March 12, its first “hermits” being a group of five men who came to participate in a week’s long meditation retreat at The Dwelling.

Meanwhile, fund raising continued as did the construction of the new Main Building. Slab heating and the plumbing had been set and the cement poured. Simultaneously, work was being done on the building of a residence for the sisters or other future staff. Throughout all these years of building, The Dwelling made it a policy to hire only local builders, plumbers, and electricians, thus providing many jobs for people trying to make a living in the most economically depressed county in the state. The Dwelling also provided jobs for local women who became known as “House Managers” for the hermitages and other buildings.

As the Hermitage Retreat grew, the sisters could no longer do the work alone. The Dwelling hired two lay-women, Lila Parish and Mary Morrow as additional full time staff. The small log house became their residence and Sisters Chris and Jeanne moved to the new staff residence called “The Cedar House”. After a year’s time, both Mary and Lila moved on from The Dwelling. Joan Groschen CSJ volunteered to come and help for three months. A tremendous blessing! By October, 2000, The Dwelling was able to hire Connie Delgado and later, Kirsten Vogt as full time live-in staff members.

Building progressed nicely but eventually money supply came to an end and work on the new Main Building came to a halt. With no resources left, The Dwelling needed help ... and help came! A friend and frequent guest, Barb Ryan, volunteered to take on the task of fund raising. Two nearby neighbors, in return for some good meals, offered to help with construction. Maria Genne, dancer and choreographer, along with Catherine Wilson, singer and composer, volunteered to stage “Winter Lights” as a Benefit Performance for The Dwelling at The College of St. Catherine. In the following two years, The Ministries Foundation of the Sisters of St. Joseph awarded The Dwelling a grant of \$40,000 toward the completion of the new kitchen/dining room. Chuck and Carol Denny generously supported The Dwelling with a gift totalling \$90,000. And so it was that in the Fall of 2000 the new Main Building, which housed an office, kitchen, dining room, laundry, massage room, garage and upstairs sleeping rooms, was completed. It was named “The Dwelling Place”. Appreciation dinners for volunteers and all workers who made the building possible were the first meals served in this beautiful space.

The Dwelling has been blessed by the visits of hundreds of guests, or “hermits”, over the years, many returning again and again and many coming for their first stay. Services offered by the staff include home cooked meals, meditation, Yoga, spiritual direction, several forms of bodywork and therapeutic massage. The sisters continue to see the need for places like

The Dwelling In The Woods. They continue to be grateful for the guidance of the Spirit and for the many people who make their ministry possible

Because the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet played such an integral part in the beginnings and continued growth of The Dwelling Hermitage Retreat, the Board of Directors, in 1998, approved the by-laws of The Dwelling to state that in the event of ending or closure, the Sisters of St. Joseph, if they so wished, would have first choice to be the recipient of all Dwelling property and assets.

At the time of this writing, it is Spring of the year 2001 and The Dwelling is in its 11th year of ministry. Jeanne is 61 years old and Chris is 70. Both envision new leadership evolving within the framework of their continued presence at The Dwelling. They see the desire for spirituality to be stronger in people than ever before. Under the care and guidance of the Spirit, it is their hope that The Dwelling will continue for many years to be a place of spiritual nourishment, solace and peace for others .