**The First Six Months of Programs at the Center:**

**Favorite Moments**

**By Heather Sundberg, Teacher**

**Empowering the Japanese Lantern & Compassion Alter**

Twilight at the Center just after Summer Solstice: A group of 30 community members quietly circumambulate the outside of the Center chanting the Metta Chant “Sabbe Satta Sukhi Hontu”/May All Beings Be Happy. Reaching the backyard, we circle around our beautiful 5-foot high 200-year-old Japanese lantern, which originally lived in a Zen monastery. This ‘lantern’ was a gift from a community member, and we conducted a simple ceremony to empower it with our blessings, and the five elements (earth, air, fire, water, space). We completed our circumambulation in silence trailing behind the Center’s Caretaker, Eddie Donoghue, who was playing Indian flute.

Once back inside the meditation hall, we built and empowered our brand new Compassion Altar, filling it with personal words, photos, blessings for those who need our caring. Now living in the Library, the Compassion Altar continues as a living expression of the community’s prayers and blessings for those known and unknown in their lives.

Feel free to leave your own blessings when you visit the Center!

**Family Program Births**

I spent a former decade of my life serving families in the dharma through the Family/Teen Programs at Spirit Rock Meditation Center. Though Mountain Stream Center will likely never have the great number of families practicing together that Spirit Rock experienced, it still brings me great joy to have set aside time each month this summer to bring our small group of local families together for story-telling, music, meditation, art, and gardening.

My favorite moments in our Family Program include Robert (a parent) leading us in Thich Naht Hahn songs (with hand movements); bell meditation with the kids sitting so still!; and the wonders of transplanting some tree seedlings growing too close to the meditation hall into pots to take to a family’s greenhouse to grow in safety. Perhaps one of these seedlings will travel back to the land at Mountain Stream as a sapling to grow up somewhere else on the land!

The future of our family gatherings is uncertain as the season’s change towards fall/winter, but the bonds we are developing with each other will last far beyond our simple gatherings, and I assume there will be more family activities during fair weather next year.

**Committed Students Program**

My all time favorite program at the Center this year is one you may not even know about: The Committed Students Program. This ‘closed’ program is for practitioners with retreat experience who are studying and practicing deeply together over time. The Program is initially two years long, but I already anticipate a third year program, as interest and dedication is very high in this group. The nice thing is that practitioners are only asked to commit to a year at a time, so there may be a few open spaces for new practitioners who want to join for year two in 2014 (see website home page for details).

It is fascinating to observe how when a group of serious practitioners comes together over time, everyone’s practice ‘takes off’ in a myriad of exquisite expressions. For some this means studying the suttas on a whole different level. For others this means really manifesting a daily sitting practice. For still others, the profound weaving of the depth of the teachings into all activities is where ‘the juice’ is. It’s all welcome at Committed Students Program. Our topics for study and practice this year are the Four Truths and the Divine Abodes. Next year will be a full exploration of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness.

One lovely unanticipated joy of the Committed Students Program is the composition of the participants. Varied in age (by Mt. Stream community standards anyway ☺), gender, sexual orientation, and with a welcome percentage of participants also practicing in 12 step traditions, or other spiritual traditions as well as the dharma; the group has a richness that is enlivening on many levels. In addition it just happened to turn out that the participants represent every other dharma sitting group (with the exception of Rocklin) with which Mountain Stream is connected. Participants are traveling from as far as Carson City, Reno, Tahoe, Chico, Davis, Placerville, Sacramento, Auburn, and The San Juan Ridge. This group represents dharma leadership of the Sierra Foothills, Sacramento Valley, and Western Nevada communities, who have never before come together in a single group over time. What a wonderful unexpected benefit having a Center has already provided!

The other thing I love about Committed Students is not just who is participating, but the way they are connecting with each other. I meet individually with each practitioner regularly. They each have a Dharma Buddy, whom they get to know better. Walking around during the ‘small group’ periods at our monthly gatherings, I am privileged to bear witness to the depth at which people are sharing, the honesty, the laughter at dharma ‘inside jokes’ and the tears concerning the challenges of life. I feel like we are growing connections which will long outlast a ‘formal program’.

**Moving Forward**

One of the things I look forward to the most as we move forward at the Center is stabilizing our center operations, events management and volunteer program to the point at which we can offer what I am calling ‘open time’ at the Center. Time for silent sitting in the meditation hall, reading in the library, spontaneous dharma discussions in the backyard, and the sharing of food together. I believe this kind of ‘open time’ will support the rest of the community to begin organically developing a similar tone of depth of connection as the Committed Students Program already experiences.

Thank you to everyone who has offered your heart, time, skills, and financial resource to support the Center to grow and thrive!