

It Takes a Sangha to Build a Zendo

by Lisa Hoffman

When Darlene Cohen and Tony Patchell began talking about moving to Spokane, Washington in 2003, we said no. We are their students and sanghas.

Darlene and Tony are long-time members of the San Francisco Zen Center community. Forced out of their apartment across the street from Zen Center during the dot-com boom by an opportunistic landlord, they had moved to a four room redwood cabin in rural Guerneville, California, about 1 1/2 hours from San Francisco.

Darlene initially commuted to San Francisco for weekly dokusan with her students, but expected them to find other teachers as she withdrew to the Russian River. She discovered that we would come to her for Sunday practice days and other dharma activities. She and Tony also offered Saturday morning sittings and Dharma talks for neighbors and friends in their large main room, where people sat around their Queen-size bed. Darlene and Tony had the beginnings of a Russian River Sangha. The problem was that they had no Zendo, and no money for a bigger building or to renovate their attached garage as the community outgrew the redwood cabin.

Then Spokane came knocking. Darlene and Tony had deep connections there with a robust sangha that badly wanted a teacher. San Francisco Zen Center was very supportive of this move because there were many teachers in the San Francisco Bay Area and none in Spokane. As Tony and Darlene considered this move, shock waves rocked their sanghas. We could not bear to lose them, and we said so. Several students convinced them it was possible to raise the money to renovate their garage. We would build a Zendo. Deeply moved by the devotion of their sanghas, Darlene and Tony decided to stay.

We formed a board of directors, which included a lawyer, a professional fundraiser (me), and a real estate investor -- all Tony and Darlene's students or long time Zen Center community friends. The first meeting was on October 2, 2004. Our lawyer, Sara Theiss, agreed to take on the long process of incorporation as a 501(c)3 nonprofit, so donors could deduct contributions. Tony became our construction project manager. Through his dogged efforts with architects, the county zoning board, and knowledgeable members of our board, we established a \$100,000 goal to build our Zendo. With additional construction costs and operational expenses for the first year, this figure soon increased to \$120,000. We were off on our first capital campaign!

Now, how were we going to raise \$120,000? I knew we needed to start with our board. We could not credibly ask others to give if we -- those closest to the vision -- had not done so ourselves. Using myself as an example, I explained the importance of commitments that were a stretch for each of us. Because of a chronic health condition, I work part time, but I made a \$1,000 pledge -- a major gift with my financial situation. I urged other board members to do the same. Most capital campaigns identify a specific amount to ask of each individual, including board members. But we didn't need to do this because our board was so ready to give. One by one, board members contacted Darlene and Tony, made their pledges, and committed \$18,000!

One board member told us how he had helped raise money to establish Hartford Street Zen Center in the early 1980s through a series of fundraising events. We decided to use this model. We planned three events in areas rich with students and friends -- San Francisco, at Darlene and Tony's home in Guerneville, and Oakland. We wanted our invitation to reflect clearly and tastefully the evening's intention, so we included the phrase "donations invited" underneath the date and location.

The San Francisco event was held on December 11, 2004, at the Haight Street home of our board president, Kirk Phillips. This late afternoon hors d'oeuvres party kicked off the campaign. We agreed on a simple program: Kirk offered a "presidential" welcome; Blanche Hartman and Michael Wenger spoke about the importance of small sanghas; Darlene described the Russian River Zendo vision, and I gave the fund-raising pitch. I knew this event had good fundraising potential because of the number of people invited, several with the capacity to make larger level gifts, meaning \$1,000-\$5,000. During the pitch, I mentioned my stretch gift and asked other board members to share the amount they had committed. I knew it was important to create a gift range, so people with the ability were encouraged to give on a higher level, and so each individual would feel good about whatever amount he or she could contribute.

The event was attended by about 50 people, and the program and pitch went exactly as planned. As I made the "ask," pledge forms, envelopes and pens were distributed, followed with a few moments of silence to give guests time and space to consider what they wanted to do. We raised \$22,000 during the evening, and several people committed to send checks, amounting to an additional \$7,000. By January 15, we had raised \$48,000. Other contributions came in as Darlene and Tony talked throughout the community about our vision, project and capital campaign.

Our second event was at Darlene and Tony's home on January 19, 2005. We envisioned this evening to be more of an open house for friends and neighbors, with a very low key invitation to support our Zendo project. Mary Mocine and Steve Stucky spoke about small sanghas, and the event raised \$4,400 that evening, with an additional \$1,300 mailed in by guests. At our April 9, 2005 board meeting our treasurer, Susan Spencer, giddily announced that \$54,000 had been raised to date.

We scheduled our Oakland event for September 17, 2005, hosted by Roland Brown and Rachel Flynn, two of Darlene's long-term students, at their cozy apartment. This event was also low-key, with a soft pitch to the 25 or so friends of modest means raising \$4,525.

Grace Schireson, of Empty Nest Zendo in North Fork, California, and a long time member of the San Francisco Zen Center community, unexpectedly volunteered to lead a daylong conference on women ancestors in Zen to benefit the Russian River Zendo building project. We were delighted! Eighty people attended the conference on March 5, 2006, probably the stormiest day on record for that year. Our drenched guests contributed over \$1,700 after expenses. Darlene and Tony also felt that Grace's significant and scholarly topic announced our presence as a serious practice community.

We had raised \$80,000 by our April 22, 2006 board meeting, and had another \$40,000 to bring in. Proud of all that we had accomplished, we knew we'd have to roll up our sleeves a bit further to finish the job. It was clear that we had maximized our event fundraising, so we formed a special committee. This new fund-raising committee met at the beginning of May, and I laid out a plan to raise the remaining funds. Our focus was on individual meetings with a short list of people capable of giving \$1,000-\$5,000, beginning at the \$5,000 level. Though some had already given, we felt they might give again to help us reach our goal.

Darlene and Tony eagerly agreed to be lead solicitors for these meetings -- they love having lunch with their friends! We also decided to send a final fall mailing to the many students, friends, family and acquaintances who were so supportive of our Russian River Zendo project. Our treasurer, Susan Spencer, and I, would conclude the campaign by soliciting institutional support from the San Francisco Zen Center.

Our completion campaign got off to a strong start with several board members contributing additional gifts. Ultimately, the board contributed \$45,000 to build the Zendo. Darlene and Tony's meetings were also a great success, bringing in \$21,000. By the October 21 board meeting, we had raised \$33,000 -- only \$7,000 to go! Time to meet with San Francisco Zen Center

An early December luncheon meeting with Susan O'Connell and Michael Wenger yielded an invitation to submit a written request for the \$5,000 we had solicited. Meanwhile, we sent hand-made holiday cards to our many friends and beloved donors *without* an "ask" because Darlene wanted simply to thank people for what they had already done. We were surprised and jubilant when, in response to our cards, the checks started coming in.

By mid-January, our holiday cards, along with other surprise contributions, (a remembrance in a will), raised another \$13,000. We were over our goal by \$6,000! Since our request to San Francisco Zen Center had been specifically to complete our capital campaign, we decided to withdraw our proposal. We were happy for Zen Center to give this money to another small sangha seeking to build a Zendo.

Our sweet little Zendo opened to sitters Saturday, August 26, 2006. It has bamboo floors, large windows overlooking the beautiful countryside, and places for about 25 people. The Russian River Zendo has become part of Indra's Net.

In all, 215 people contributed to our capital campaign.

It takes many Sanghas to build a Zendo.