

## ARTS &amp; THEATRE

# Ashram goes on while founder battles cancer

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For the 75 residents of Sebastian's Kashi Ashram, Saturday's traditional evening prayer gathering held particular meaning.

With an estimated 100 visitors, and 50 phone lines open from as far away as London, the voice of Ma Jaya Sati Bhagavati, their guru, filled the room they call their temple. Softer and more subdued than usual, though still with its trademark Brooklyn accent, Ma led the evening meditation via wireless microphone from her bed, just on the other side of the wall.

In mid-January, the unstoppable force that is Ma Jaya, 71, was diagnosed with cancer, weeks after her first book was released, a guide to getting around bad karma.

That voice, so boisterous in better days, could turn heads in Sebastian, and has for 35 years.

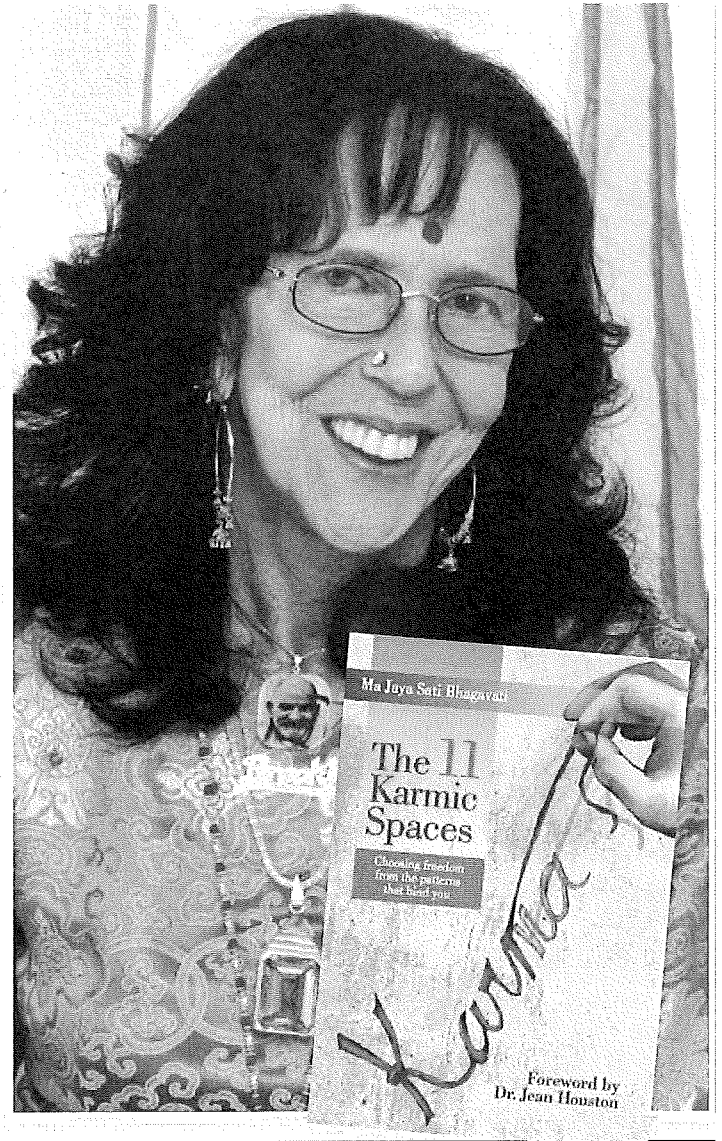
That's when the one-time cohort of "Be Here Now" author Ram Dass and the student of the '70s guru known as

Maharaj-ji, left Brooklyn and bought a large tract of woodlands on the St. Sebastian River.

That land eventually became an ashram with more than 100 residents, and many more coming regularly to study—including nearby neighbor Arlo Guthrie. Working either at the ashram or in the community at large, its members became known for service as much as for their Hindu-influenced philosophies, tending to the needy as an intrinsic part of Ma Jaya's teachings.

Most remarkably, the town of Sebastian has come to embrace the ashram. Until 2005, it had a K-12 school for 90 children including many from outside the ashram. Its yoga classes are well-regarded, teaching a technique Ma Jaya developed. Its non-profit, \$6.5 million group home for 40 limited-income seniors, opened two years ago, and its design is considered a prototype for the state.

Before the recession slowed construction, a newly-gated riverfront residential development was well underway, with 18 lots selling and four



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homes already built.

Not that Kashi's assimilation led Ma Jaya to morph into the typical Sebastian senior citizen.

As recently as December, taping an L.A. radio talk show to promote her new book, the slender, raven-haired 71-year-old Joyce Green Difiore Cho – her birth name plus her two ex-husbands' – still wielded a voice ringing with self-assurance. Armed with hair-trigger candor, her exhortations were meted out like the Jewish grandmother she is – albeit an exotically tattooed and bejeweled one – in an accent acquired under the Coney Island boardwalk, that drops a “what-eva!” whenever she runs out of steam.

Ma Jaya was just starting something of a media blitz for her new, self-published book. Transcribed by assistants from Ma's taped lectures, the book is a summary of a theme that has developed since 2005: how to lessen the karmic effects, “a practical way to change your karma and therefore your life,” as she puts it. Always careful to assert that her philosophies are not based in religion, she offers her readers “paths” out of the unstoppable flow of thought rooted in the past.

“We've all been everything,” she writes.

Indeed, her salty tales told on that radio show, which aired in January, seemed to emanate from a past life. At points sounding more like a chummy manicurist than a guru with a worldwide following, she regaled the host with details of her bizarre transition from street urchin to spiritual leader.

Growing up in a cellar apartment near the boardwalk at Coney Island, she claims she first hung out with homeless people at the tender age of 7. Raised Jewish, at 15, she married an Italian-American, and ballooned to 250 pounds by stashing bread behind the toilet. When her girlfriends started getting thin, she went to a Jack LaLanne studio and learned yoga breathing, practicing so zealously that she had visions of Jesus; to hear her tell it on the radio show, she was chatting him up like the butcher selling her salami.

From there, her spiritual gifts – or at the very least, her natural charisma and powerful intuition – catapulted her into an Ivy League-laden cadre of Americans pursuing eastern religions, including Richard Alpert, the Harvard psychologist and associate of Timothy Leary. Alpert was renamed Ram Dass by Neem Karoli Baba or Maharaj-ji, his and Ma's mutual guru.

When the two had a falling out, Ma Jaya came to Sebastian. But her ascent into international circles did not stop with small-town living.

Awarded a Humanitarian Service Award by the Gandhi Foundation, she has spoken twice before sessions of the Parliament of the World's Religions. She spoke on the subject of spir-

ity and AIDS at the Carter Center, and she and the graduating class at The River School brought a piece of the AIDS/HIV Names Quilt to Africa for the first time. She addressed an interfaith youth assembly at the Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders at the UN.

At the invitation of Harvard religious scholar Diana Eck, she spoke at Harvard Divinity School in 1994.

On January's L.A. radio show, though, it was a meeting with the Dalai Lama that warranted mention, not for granting her an audience, but for giving her advice on her new hair color; a failed effort at platinum that ended up green, she said. “In perfect English, he told me to go back to the way it was,” she said, punctuated with her signature cackle.

In tandem with Ma Jaya's new book, there has been renewed focus on Ma Jaya's paintings. In December, a number of her artworks were on view at the juried Sebastian Riverfront Fine Art and Music Festival.

Those that sold seemed to grab passersby with their spiritual impact, said Anjani Cirillo, a swami at the ashram. Most of the paintings date from the 1990s, when sales were so significant that a separate company was formed to handle them.

Untrained and spiritually inspired, Ma Jaya painted in series, often with Hindu iconography and sometimes with autobiographical themes. Many have to do with motherhood.

“It's devotional in nature and it has a lot of power,” says Cirillo. Ma Jaya's vivid works cover the walls of Kashi's public buildings.

“My paintings are a meditation for me, but they also are my chance to serve others,” Ma Jaya writes on the Kashi website. “I am painting not only for the two eyes, but also for the inner eye.”

As Ma Jaya's teachings caught on, her artwork was shown around world, including at Villanova University and the University of New Orleans, galleries in Miami, New York and Los Angeles, and even abroad, in Rome, Paris and Munich.

The enduring reach of Kashi and its philosophy of inclusion – all the world's major religions are represented in the ashram's gardens – defy the difficult times it has endured throughout the years. While it seems to have dealt well with its outlier status in the rural reaches of the county, life among its own residents has not always been serene.

In past decades, as some rebuked Ma Jaya's leadership methods, there was talk of cultism. A handful of former residents resorted to calling in police, mostly in issues of child custody. At the time, and as recently as 10 years ago, experts came out on both sides of the cult question. But most agreed that residents at the ashram, many of whom are highly

educated professionals working in Vero and elsewhere, are free to come and go as they please, and therefore not under undue control.

While Ma Jaya's influence may have extended far into personal lives, including parenting and marital relations, she has led hundreds toward a life of service.

Long active in gay and lesbian rights issues, the ashram offered respite care to AIDS patients early on in the epidemic. Two years ago, it opened a group living facility for limited-income seniors. Its members routinely visit nursing homes from here to West Palm Beach, and do-

nate to an orphanage in Africa. Ma Jaya's motto, born of her days with the homeless “gurus” of Coney Island: “There are no throw-away people.”

Locally, Kashi Ashram has become almost as familiar in charity circles as the Rotary Club. Perhaps the most visible of its residents is Cirillo, former principal of Kashi's private K-12 school, The River School, which closed in 2005.

Cirillo, who lives at the ashram, is president of the Sebastian Clambake Foundation that raised \$200,000 for Sebastian charities. She was named Sebastian Woman of the Year in 2009. ■