



OF MIRACLES & CRAZY WISDOM

Anne Jablonski recounts the unlikely convergence of seekers, yogis, healers, and artists at a Montana ranch over 40 years ago that would lead to the creation of the Feathered Pipe, one of America’s great retreat getaways

Life happened to India Supera when she was busy – as Allen Saunders wrote and John Lennon later sang – making other plans. On every cultural and political front, 1965 was a turbulent and memorable year in America. Bob Dylan ‘went electric’ and was booed off the stage at the Newport Folk Festival. Martin Luther King led thousands of marchers from Selma to Montgomery. US bombings ramped up in North Vietnam, Sandy Koufax took the LA Dodgers over the Minnesota Twins in the World Series and President Lyndon Johnson unveiled his agenda for A Great Society. Meanwhile, a deep craving for answers sent a young and unhappy southern Californian seeker named India Supera in 1965 on a world journey in search of a spiritual teacher. She fell gravely ill with hepatitis in Pakistan, came close to death, and recovered enough to



continue travelling on foot for another year and a half around India, hoping to find a guru to give her life direction. But she could not find her teacher. Her hopes dashed and spirit weak, the discouraged young woman made plans to abandon her quest for a guru. She came within a hair’s breadth of returning to the US and, in her words, “settling into oblivion at a job with the phone company.”

Soul searching

Fate, Supera recalls, had other ideas. She continued her trek and walked to southern India. There she met a 44-year-old Indian holy man named Sathya Sai Baba, who invited her and her sister to stay at his Bangalore home. “He turned out to be the perfect teacher for me,” she recalls. She remained with Sai Baba for over two years, working in one of his hospitals. Confident that she’d found her new home, Supera began to settle into the quiet life of a penniless devotee at his ashram. Soon, however, agonising dental pain sent her back to the US for medical care. Divine providence and an invitation from fellow Sai Baba devotee and friend Jermaine Duncan intervened, leading Supera to an unexpected setting – a 110-acre ranch outside of Helena, Montana that Duncan had recently purchased from the industrialist Rheem family. Duncan had dreams of starting a conscious living and healing centre at ‘the old Rheem Ranch’ – renamed the Feathered Pipe Ranch. A few months later, her medical issues resolved, Supera set sights on returning to her teacher’s Indian ashram. Fate, again, had other plans. Duncan’s terminal cancer diagnosis led her to stay on to nurse her friend through her illness, just as the Feathered Pipe Ranch began its steady morph into an unlikely spiritual salon in the heart of the American west.

Just before her death, Duncan summoned Supera to her side and told her that she was leaving the Ranch to her. Supera protested. Duncan insisted.

Birth of a retreat centre

Following Duncan’s death, Supera was torn. “I didn’t know what to do. I thought I should just sell the place,” she recalled. “I was stuck with this white elephant. I never even had a chequebook or any money, and here I was with this place which, at the time, cost about \$20,000 a year to maintain,” said Supera. She slapped a fire-sale price tag on the property and waited for offers that never came. She shared her plans with Sai Baba to sell the ranch, donate the money, and return to India as his follower. The holy man, however, had other ideas. “There are already too many followers in the world,” Sai Baba told Supera. He urged the devotee to keep the ranch and create an educational centre to train spiritual leaders. Months later, during a sweat lodge ceremony, Supera and friends witnessed what she describes as a profound visionary experience, seeing that the property was meant to be an educational centre. The following day, a wealthy tycoon “driving a black Lincoln with a bar in the back seat” offered \$500,000 in cash to take the white elephant off her back. “If you don’t think your visions are tested, you should be standing there when someone opens up a briefcase and offers you a half a million dollars.” Supera declined the offer and set about creating a retreat centre - with zero operating capital and a whole lot of help from her friends.

Wellness centre

She later recalled the string of unlikely miracles that enabled the ranch to blossom into one of North America’s first centres for conscious living. Supera and friends began cobbling together a loose administrative infrastructure. Soon, the talent to host yoga workshops - a new idea for its time - gravitated to Montana. “In those days,” recalled yoga teaching legend Judith Hanson Lasater, “Montana was a lot more ‘exotic.’ And a ‘yoga workshop’ was just plain weird.” Supera adds: “Fortunately, there are such things as miracles, crazy wisdom, and the greatness that comes from not realising you are trying to do the impossible.” She and friends hosted the ranch’s inaugural, three-week yoga workshop in 1975, with Lasater teaching. “Everyone involved simply pitched in with whatever skill they had,” says Supera. Forty-one years later, Feathered Pipe’s status as a flagship for North American householder yoga is the stuff of legend. Many of today’s foremost voices on yoga, meditation, art, wellness and health have passed through the ranch’s gates. Joseph Campbell, Dr Andrew Weil, Liliás Folan, Dr Bernard Jensen, Angela Farmer, Rodney Yee, Patricia Walden, Erich Schiffmann, Seane Corn, John Schumacher and world-renowned Native American flutist R. Carlos Nakai - to name a handful - are all Feathered Pipe alumni.

The magic of the pipe

The name ‘Feathered Pipe’ was the brainchild of avant-garde artist Liam O’Gallagher and his life partner, Bob Rheem, son of the wealthy industrialist. The moniker pays homage to the Native American land on which the ranch sits. One legend holds that when a tribe sought Spirit’s guidance on what direction to take, a feathered pipe was hung from a tripod. The pipe pointed the way. How has Feathered Pipe sustained a retreat centre so far away from a population centre for over four decades? No one seems to



know, exactly, but students who make annual summer pilgrimages to Montana describe an enigmatic alchemy that magnetically draws them to return each year. “‘The Pipe’ is more than just a special place. It is a magical place,” explains Lasater. “But most importantly, the magic of the Pipe is that it simply changes lives.” Others point to how the Big Sky setting and mountain vistas nudge their senses back to life again. Some credit the tender reverence for the Native American spirit that the land’s stewards embrace as the root of its endurance. Supera says Feathered Pipe’s perseverance can only be explained by the ineffable “something higher” that O’Gallagher told her was at work at Feathered Pipe decades earlier. It continues, she says, “by the grace of God.”

Find out more at: featheredpipe.com

SEVA SERVICE

Humanitarian and socially relevant work remains at the core of Feathered Pipe’s *seva* (service) mission and programmes. From incubating the Tibetan Children’s Education Foundation and the Veterans Yoga Project to hosting free healing retreats for military veterans struggling with post-traumatic stress, the foundation focuses its offerings on pressing issues of our time. Last year, the foundation launched The Mindful Unplug, a homegrown initiative applying thousands of years of yogic wisdom into workshops offering practical tools and techniques to stay healthy and grounded in our digitally saturated lives. The work continues.

