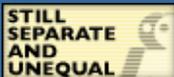




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THIS STORY

Woman fulfills her foretold destiny with group that gathers to chant

By **MARIE ROHDE**
mrohde@journalsentinel.com

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Shorewood - The first Friday of every month, the basement of the North Shore Presbyterian Church fills with some 250 people who gather to make a joyful noise in Hindi, a language that most understand only in their hearts.

"It's calming and relaxing," says Joshua Clark, a 19-year-old student from West Bend who often attends. "It's a break from the day-to-day headaches of life."

The event is known as kirtan, a Sanskrit word for the call-and-response chant that is a part of the centuries-old tradition of yoga. Hundreds of kirtan groups gather across the country, but this one is said to be the second largest, smaller only than one in New York City.

The leader of the group is a 37-year-old Indiana native who was born Julie Ann Hobing, a name she no longer uses. Her teacher, Swami Rama, renamed her Ragani (it rhymes with mahogany) when she was 15, around the time he told her that kirtan was her destiny.

Ragani was exposed to yoga and Eastern spirituality at an early age. Her mother taught yoga in South Bend and brought other teachers - including Swami Rama - to the community. Frequently, they stayed in the Hobing home, fascinating the girl then known as Julie.

At 15, she was accepted as a student at the Himalayan Institute, an ashram in Pennsylvania. She was three years younger than the minimum age to begin the course, but an exception was made, and she studied the various branches of yoga for 15 years, becoming close to Swami Rama.

"When we say 'yoga' in the west, we often think of the postures," Ragani said. "Yoga is an entire field that includes how to think, how to eat, basically

East Side Kirtan Ensemble



Photo/Dale Guldan

Ragani (top), born Julie Ann Hobing, leads a kirtan group in chants while musicians play meditative music.



Photo/Dale Guldan

The East Side Kirtan Ensemble was founded in 1999, and the popularity of the spiritual event continues to grow in Milwaukee. The group, said to be the second largest in the country, meets on the first Friday of every month at the North Shore Presbyterian Church in Shorewood.

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how to be. It's a comprehensive program of how to transform yourself."

Swami Rama told her parents when they came to pick her up that her dharma was to sing, she said. "Following your heart in life is the closest definition of what a dharma really is," Ragani said.

Despite his prediction, Swami Rama encouraged Ragani to go to school. Eventually, she got a doctorate in clinical health psychology and behavioral medicine. She later became an acupuncturist.

"My teacher always said, 'Learn to serve others,' " she said. "That's pretty broad guidance, but when we follow our hearts, that allows us to serve others and to give back to the world."

In 1996, Ragani married Dale Buegel, a yoga teacher and physician who practices alternative medicine in Milwaukee. Legally, her name is Julie Ragani Buegel, but she is known by the name Ragani.

Her first couple of attempts at getting a kirtan group started did not attract many people. She was frustrated and decided to go to Swami Rama - who had died two years before - for guidance.

She said she thought about him as she meditated.

"I could feel his presence," she recalled. "I told him that I would sing in my apartment if that was what I was supposed to do. If it was something else, I needed clear guidance."

Ten days later, she got a call from Theresa Kaplan, a yoga teacher at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee who had heard about her from a friend. She suggested the Kenwood United Methodist Church near campus.

The first session held at the church was in September 1999. Forty people showed up. The next month there were 60. Then 70. Soon, the group had outgrown the church, and Ragani was searching for a larger facility. That led to North Shore Presbyterian.

In March 2003, she put out her first CD, "The Best of Both Worlds," and that resulted in more growth. Ragani said she's going to have to start looking for a larger space.

The kirtan is held in a basement room. A half-dozen brass early American-style chandeliers are dimmed for the event; a massive tie-dyed sheet covers the carpet in the center of the room, and some participants sit on yoga cushions.

Ragani and as many as a dozen musicians sit at the front of the room, surrounded by dozens of white votive candles. Several of the musicians have had brushes with fame in other musical genres - Fred Bliffert, a rhythm and blues singer from Freddie and the Freeloaders, plays drums made by Michael Kashou, who played bass on Garbage's debut platinum CD as well as with Paul Cebar and others.

Bliffert called kirtan a "good transition into a spiritual realm." He joined Ragani in 2001.



Photo/Dale Guldan

One participant plays her own tambourine at the event, which is touted as relaxing yet energetic.

If You Join

The next kirtan with Ragani will be at 7:30 p.m. Friday, at the North Shore Presbyterian Church, 4048 N. Bartlett Ave. in Shorewood.

"I hadn't been so excited about any music in 30 years," Bliffert said.

The songs began slowly, building speed, then slowing for the conclusion after 10 minutes or more; several people danced to the music, others swayed. A screen behind the musicians had the words for the audience response.

"Ganapati Namo Namaste/Namo Namaste Namo Namaste" was the first song, one that Ragani explained was a call for a removal of obstacles. In between most of the songs was a moment of silence, a time to meditate, Ragani said.

Those attending a recent kirtan ranged from young children with their parents to silver-haired seniors.

Katie Bliffert, 18, plays a tanpura - a sitar-like stringed instrument - in the band with her father and the other musicians. She's invited many of her friends, she said.

"I don't think I've taken anyone who didn't enjoy it," she said. "I get so high and energized, it's like I've had five cups of coffee."

Miguel de Jesus, 58, said kirtan "recharges" him.

"It's just a place I can let everything go and feel the energy of all the people around me."

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