

# Women with vision

"Here we have women who are examples of what's working, positive and visionary examples of what's possible, rather than what's not happening."

By Jan Henrikson

All it took was one trip to the Middle East. One macrobiotic dinner. And two open hearts. Rama Vernon was dining with a woman from Lebanon who ran a spiritual renewal retreat supported by the Princess of Saudi Arabia.

"What is the secret to peace in the Middle East?" asked Rama, who would later form Women of Vision and Action (WOVA), a spiritually-based global network of women whose mission is to create nothing less than individual and world peace. "There must be a turnkey. There's got to be a way."

After considering Rama's question, the Lebanese woman responded, "I've been through the war. I've lost my family. I escaped with just the clothes on my back and I've had to start my life all over again." Tears welled in her eyes. "I've given up hope. I don't think there will ever be peace in the Middle East."

Give up hope? Alien words to Rama, who was raised by loving, activist parents.

Rama's father had campaigned and led marches on the state capitol of California so chiropractors could be licensed. He withstood jail and threatening letters from the American Medical Association and the California Medical Association until the chiropractors won.

"My father would say, 'Don't do things just because everyone else



*Rama Jyoti Vernon is an inspiration to women around the Earth - her vision of world peace has brought nations together and sparked the creation of WOVA, an international group of women stepping into the power of the feminine emerging.*

PHOTO: Courtesy of Marie Kearney

is doing it. You have to listen to your heart, and live in integrity even if everybody's doing something totally different. Learn to stand alone." That's one of the greatest gifts we can learn on this spiritual journey we have," she says.

A native of the Middle East, Rama's father also spoke in many different churches every week. "I was steeped in six, seven different religions a week. I loved it. I was always looking for God and I could find him in any church. I didn't have to have only one, you know. I had such a free childhood—the basis of which was serving humanity with a strong body and strong mind."

Her mother was a medical clairvoyant who studied under Eunice Ingham, one of the developers of modern Reflexology. Rama's mother introduced her to Yoga, which she attributes to giving her the superhuman energy and an ability to stay centered that she has drawn upon in times such as this pivotal dinner.

As Rama shared this story with me, her voice was soft, but fiery. Her presence so powerful and open-hearted, the phone could barely contain the vibrancy of her energy.

"Nothing is impossible. We can create miracles if we hold our minds to it. I wanted to say to my

new friend, 'No, no you can't give up!' But something inside me said, 'Don't say anything. Who are you to tell that woman not to give up? You have not lived through the war. You have not lost family members to a war of violence.' So I sat there, trying to feel her feelings and connect with her heart. As we sat there in silence, I took her hand."

Earlier, this woman had confessed to Rama that she felt powerless to do anything but strengthen her own inner peace through prayer and meditation. Rama had also believed that for 30 years.

"I started meditating as a teenager," Rama added. "That was my gift to world peace. I didn't know the world would call me out to Russia to help bridge the gap of the Cold War. Now I know that after we do our inner work, the world—if it is to be our calling—will bring us out to contribute to humanity in a more direct way."

As a charismatic Yoga teacher, founder of the *Yoga Journal* and the California Institute for Yoga Teachers Training, co-founder of the American Yoga College, (and ultimately founder of Unity in Yoga International and the Iyengar Association of Northern California) Rama traveled to Russia at the peak of the Cold War in 1984, intent on holding Yoga conferences. She arrived with a suitcase full of Yoga books, unaware that Yoga was banned and people were being jailed if they even meditated.

Undaunted, she organized a conference of spiritually-oriented people under the guise of their professional credentials. She gathered together psychologists and doctors, suggesting they hold the vision of their spirituality as they spoke about their professions.

"The love field was so great, people walked out totally transformed," she says.

She began holding non-stop conferences, bringing to Russia

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thousands and thousands of people. She and her husband eventually formed the Center for Soviet Dialogue.

"Pretty soon, Gorbachev's people said, 'Groups like yours have done more to end the Cold War than any government. You have brought to us the best of the heart of America.'"

Rama traveled to Russia more than 50 times in seven years. "Practically a commuter," she quips. "We were taught they were

the enemy, the evil empire, and I was scared to face the enemy behind the Iron Curtain. But when I did and I looked into their faces, I didn't see the face of the enemy, I saw the face of the friend."

Rama and her husband continued focusing their global good will on Russia until Gorbachev left power. Then they turned their attention toward the Middle East, to create a dialogue between the Israelis and the Palestinians.

"It's the same work. It doesn't matter whether it's Russia or women or the Middle East. It's being there to help others remember

their one humanity. We just find new ways to do that," she says.

Now her new way was to sit with this war-weary Lebanese woman. "I felt we can't give up hope. But I didn't say that. I just sat there holding her hand, sitting in the silence, feeling her feelings. Then she just turned to me and her face was totally different and she said, 'Maybe there is something we can do. Let's bring the women together.'"

Rama smiles. "When she said that, I felt it was the command of God. I really felt it was the Universe speaking to me. This was my next mission. Then she said, 'Bring the women here. I will cook. We'll have a day together and we'll share our visions of peace. We'll take those visions and I will get them to the leaders of the Middle East, through the Princess of Saudi Arabia.'"

## Purpose, Passion & Service

"In the past, women have felt so powerless, thinking 'What can I do to make peace happen in the world or change the economic situation for women?' WOVA gives us the opportunity to envision what we want and link up our visions with women across the world," says Phyllis Grimes, a co-coordinator for the Tucson Chapter of WOVA, which began in 1996. Phyllis worked with Rama in the early years, traveling to Russia with her, and helped establish the Center for Soviet Dialogue there.

"As women are learning to step into leadership roles, it's important to lead from feminine energy in a balanced, non-competitive manner. In this organization we are realizing the kind of incredible strength we have being females on a female planet," says Michaela Alger, also a co-coordinator of the Tucson Chapter.

"WOVA helps empower women to know their vision of a peaceful world, that works for everyone, is important and can be effective," says Phyllis.

Members of WOVA magnify their visions in four major celebrations, called Link-Up Days, which fall on the solstices and equinoxes. On these days, women around the world meet at a synchronized time and hold the vision of a new world through meditation and ceremony. Several chapters around the country — including the Tucson Chapter — are working on a Peace Tapestry which will go to the United Nations in the new millennium, year 2000.

The focus of the Tucson Chapter for 1998 revolves around support, networking and visioning. They meet monthly. Their April meeting is on Sunday, April 19, 2-4pm, at a member's home. In May, the group plans to join the Phoenix Chapter (May 17) for a meeting at Squaw Peak Park.

To contact WOVA's national information line, call: 1-800-909-WOVA.

For information on the Tucson Chapter, contact co-coordinator Phyllis Grimes at (520) 529-6010.

For information on the Phoenix Chapter, contact co-coordinator Alexa Morgan at (602) 842-2644.

Within two weeks, Jewish American, Iranian, Palestinian, Saudi Arabian, Lebanese, and Egyptian women gathered together. Most of them were not only strangers, but strangers whose parents, grandparents, and great-great-grandparents had hated and mistrusted each other enough to kill.

The women all sat in a circle, not knowing what was about to happen, certain only that it was important for them to be together. Then they began to share their stories.

"The Israeli woman shared how her friends were killed or maimed in the war. She began to really cry. It just so happened that the next person to speak was a Palestinian woman who shared how her family had been killed by the Israeli military. How their homes had been bombed. The Israeli woman heard her pain, just as the Palestinian had heard the Israeli woman's pain.

"The Palestinian woman began to cry. She motioned to the Israeli woman and said, 'And my sister there has suffered the same thing.' In three seconds they were up on their feet and they ran to each other in the circle and they were holding each other, crying. And I thought if that can happen between two people perhaps it can happen between two nations."

Rama pauses, emotion welling in her voice.

As the other women shared their stories, "it was almost as if we were one-mind one-heart, listening to the One speaking, feeling her feelings." They broke bread together, going deep within, laughing and crying, and each left, feeling as if something dramatic had shifted in her world.

Apparently it shifted more than the women involved. Shortly after that meeting, Arafat shook hands with Israeli Prime Minister Rabin on the White House lawn.

One woman said, "I never thought that women speaking about peace and holding the vision of peace in the Middle East in living rooms throughout the country would make any difference — but now after seeing this, I've changed my viewpoint."

That was the spark of WOVA (Women of Vision and Action). The rest unfolded quickly and effortlessly. Before the year was through, Rama had been invited to speak to 500 women across the nation.

"Everywhere I went, I heard it said that the feminine is emerging, not just in women, but in men, children, everywhere. To bring forth the end of war, to bring forth a peaceful world for the next millennium," she says.

The meetings culminated in 1994 with a conference in Washington, D.C. called "Women of Vision: Leadership for a New World." Women in the forefront of their fields from Asia, Africa, the Native American communities, Europe, Canada, America, and the Middle East united in positive action.

"What we think, we manifest," says Rama. "Thoughts held in mind," as Dale Carnegie said, "produce after their kind." More and more people are coming to that realization. What we do as people is focus on what's not working rather than what is. Here we have women who are examples of what's working, positive and visionary examples of

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what's possible rather than what's not happening. "

The experience was so inspiring that 40 women said it must not stop. And it hasn't. WOVA has a momentum of its own. Branches have popped up everywhere, and exist worldwide.

Rather than using the old masculine paradigm of setting the structure and then filling it with content, WOVA allows the structure to grow organically from the center. Some groups are more spiritually-oriented, while others are more action-oriented. Envisioning, however, is key to all the branches. Just as the women of that first circle, these

women who have joined WOVA learn to clarify and verbalize their own personal and global visions.

"The true test," says Rama, "is to keep your heart open no matter what. I'm so hopeful, even though you can look at the situation in the Middle East or Africa and see no solutions.

"Yet the rays of light may be coming through even where it seems the darkness is so dense. I feel we're in the dawning of an age where kindness and good will for all will prevail. It is truly an historic, exciting, evolutionary time and I'm so happy to be a part of it and a part of so many women attempting to create a positive blueprint for the millennium."

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