



RAMA VERNON

by Linda S. Masterson

In February of 1988, 500 Soviet and American citizen diplomats will be gathering in Washington, DC for the *First Annual Soviet-American Citizens' Summit*. Meeting for five days, February 1-5, these people of our two countries will convene in roundtable discussions on various topics, including human rights, women's exchanges, citizens' diplomacy, its origins and objectives; and regional issues (such as Afghanistan and Central America).

The Summit has as its object the creation of joint projects between the citizens of our two countries. Already in the development stage are many projects: a writers' exchange, a joint Soviet-American publication, a documentary film council, cooperative educational projects and youth exchanges, a citizen-based joint space project, and most remarkable of all — an alternative-to-Star-Wars project, a comprehensive ecological, economic and technological proposal, thinking beyond the standard defensive paradigm and toward international stability.

Barbara Marx-Hubbard is the Conference Chair. It is her intention that the Summit be "innovation-oriented, not issue-oriented." In addition to being a working meeting, the Summit will honor the work of others in both countries, those who have worked for years to establish the legitimacy and potency of citizen diplomacy.

The Citizens' Summit is an unprecedented event, a tribute to the work each of us is doing to bring forth peace as the reality in our minds and in our world. It is a joint project of the Soviet Peace Committee, a powerful Soviet governmental agency, and the *CENTER FOR SOVIET-AMERICAN DIALOGUE*, a grassroots citizens' diplomacy organization started less than four years ago by Rama Vernon. This is the story of her courage, the courage she has brought forth in

others, and the opportunities she has created for individuals to experience the profound unity of human experience, the synergy of aligned individual action, and the glue that makes the almost-intolerable uncertainty of the work bearable: faith in God, the Power of Love.

On a cold Colorado night in the autumn of 1984, Rama Vernon was stranded in an automotive service department, waiting for a dead battery to be recharged. She used the time to brush up her proposal. This American housewife, mother, and grandmother was going to share her thoughts with the Soviets. She had recently returned from the USSR. The meetings there had been all show and no substance; no exchange, no room for dialogue. And, now, Rama was going to tell them what they could do to improve the meeting format to create dialogue.

She also suggested that she would dedicate herself to bringing Americans to the Soviet Union, as long as dialogue was the mutual goal. One of the Soviets was in New England. She had talked American Airlines into giving her a ticket. She would deliver her proposal and then be off to Central America, where she had been invited to produce a yoga conference.

To her astonishment, the Soviet was impressed by her proposal and asked her to begin her project immediately. She never made the appointment in Central America, and she's been to the Soviet Union 21 times since, taking 700 Americans with her. What happened to bring this about?

In 1984, Danaan Parry, of the *Earthstewards Network*, had invited Rama to go with one of his groups to the Soviet Union. It took another experience, however, to provide the impetus. She attended a luncheon on US-USSR relations, produced by *Target Seattle* and the *World Affairs Council*. An American diplomat and a Soviet diplomat were to speak. The program was very disturbing to

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### Dialogue with an Open Heart

Rama, not the points on which the speakers differed, but for the way in which they differed: There was no dialogue, absolutely no room for sharing anything. It was a stunning experience.

Rama had been raised by parents who were her first teachers in metaphysical thought. Her family participated in the Science of Mind Church. She realized that as long as this stonewalling went on between us, we were going to reap its harvest in the world. She realized that the officials were locked into their scripts. They could not speak freely. It would take folks, folks like you and me, to act in these circumstances. Without knowing exactly what she might do, she joined Danaan's group.

On her first day in the Soviet Union in the spring of 1984, she stood in Red Square looking up at the red star atop the Kremlin. She took in the banners of Lenin, Engels and Marx. Goose-stepping soldiers were drilling for the May Day celebration to be held the next day. She was standing in the heart of the "Evil Empire" and she was terrified. Overcome with fear, the depth of which she had not known existed, she stood there, both shocked and determined to do something about it.

In the days to follow, as she met Soviet after Soviet face-to-face, she came to see in those faces the face of the friend. The fear subsided as her experience of the Russian people taught her our shared humanity. She reasoned, "If I've had this fear, others much have it too. If I didn't know I had it, they probably don't know they have it, Americans and Soviets alike. Our thoughts will bring us this reality we fear unless we act. Our thoughts are more powerful than bombs. Americans are free to travel. I must bring them here — as many as I can." She had taken a vow that led to the Colorado evening spent in an automotive shop, a trip to New England and her proposal to the Soviets. The Center For Soviet-American Dialogue had become a reality.

By 1986, when this writer travelled with her to Helsinki, Leningrad, and Moscow, Rama had taken several hundred people to the Soviet Union. She had become part of a most remarkable underground. The "US Department of Citizen Diplomacy" was a vital, resourceful, loosely knit network of committed individuals and associations working together on their various projects, sharing bits of knowledge — things that had worked, things that hadn't. Rama was welcomed into this network and the pace accelerated.

Rama traveled to the Soviet Union twice while she was pregnant, wanting to be there for the birth of her child, wanting this peace-child to be born in the underwater-birthing facility there. No airline would accept her as a passenger

during her ninth month; so Myra (pronounced meera, and meaning "peace" and "world" in Russian) was born here.

However, when Myra was three months old and nursing, Rama and Linda Johnson made the trip. Rama, Myra and Linda met with Soviet officials. The mother nursed her child as plans were discussed. On one occasion, an official leaned over and said, "I think the little one knows what we are discussing. She seems so wise, watching us." On many occasions, Rama was called "a brave woman, such a brave woman. My, you are such a brave woman." She responded to one such remark, "Why, it seems so normal to me, and you must understand that when I started this work, I was so very scared." The Russian interrupted, "Oh, but no, bravery does not mean you are without fear. It means you have the courage to face your fear. You are a very brave woman."

Over the months, the relationship between the CSAD and the Soviets has developed. US officials are impressed that objectives that were unattainable officially were rapidly being realized by this upstart organization and its new diplomacy. Time after time, Rama and the CSAD family are asked, "How do you do it? How have you achieved this so quickly? We've worked for years on this and gotten nowhere."

The answer is simple. Rama replies quietly, "We just love the people. When things go wrong, and things do go wrong, we calm ourselves, maybe pray a moment, lift our eyes into the face of the friend, and love the people."

Vladimir Posner, Phil Donahue's counterpart for the 1985 *Leningrad-Seattle Spacebridge* and an official Soviet spokesperson, confirmed this in a recent meeting with Rama, saying, "You have penetrated very deep. Very deep." An indication of this exceptional trust is the fact that the CSAD was asked to host several of the Central Committee members travelling to the US with the USSR delegation to the Reagan-Gorbachev Summit in December. "These days," Rama says, "the relationship between the CSAD and the Soviets is a lot like family. We have squabbles and outbreaks of emotion; but they flare and subside, and the work goes on."

There are wonderful stories, heartwarming stories yet to be told: of the American doctor who wanted to wear his gorilla suit in Red Square, and the hysterical official conversation surrounding his request; of the young Jewish woman who journeyed to her grandparents home in Minsk, a journey to feel more deeply the love of the Russian mother who sent her children to safety in America, never to see them again; the story of a Soviet artist who used to dance with Baryshnikov, who sent his love for Baryshnikov back with new

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## Interviews

### *Rama Vernon, continued*

American friends; or the Soviet who has been "running" in the underground since his brother was killed back in the "bad years," and is now too scared to quit running. So many stories, and they'll never all be told, for this is a time of living the stories for ourselves.

Today, the work of the CSAD is conducted by a remarkable, small staff of dedicated souls: Ariel Murphy, Phyllis Grimes, Bea Culver, Ron King, Dorothy Hiestand and Michaela Belding. In a couple of bedrooms in a private home in Bellevue, Washington, surrounded with all the concerns of home-making (dishes; repairs to the roof; who's watching the baby; can

you take her while I go pick up the Soviets at the airport; did anyone get back to Barbra Streisand's office; the printer, please don't forget to call the printer, we need those letters this afternoon), this nucleus of people, along with an always-changing, ever-inspired and inspiring team of volunteers, do this work.

There are satellite offices in New York City and Washington, DC. The CSAD has received no major funding, relying solely on the income generated by its training programs, trips to the Soviet Union, and a few modest grants. Work days are long, 16-18 hours. The checkbook is frequently empty. The work is endless and many opportunities go unfulfilled for lack of resources. But, what work! A

path with a heart, as Don Juan would call it. And there is room for participation of every sort. Volunteers are needed as office helpers, child-care helpers, project directors, fund-raisers, and public-relations coordinators. In fact, everyone committed to peace is invited to participate.

I asked Rama what she wanted VISION readers to know. She said, "Tell them to hold our national leaders in light. Tell them to call and volunteer at one of the CSAD offices. Tell them to come in and take on a project or a public-relations program. Tell them to let us know what they'd like to do. Tell them to sponsor a Soviet to the Summit. Tell them to join one of our trips and become a citizen diplomat. Tell them to attend the

Summit. Tell them that, if this is the spirit in which they'd like to see our foreign relations conducted, we need their help.

Tell them to wash their dishes for peace and tuck their children in at night for peace. Tell them to pray. Tell them to pray for us and our leaders and the Soviets and our world. And tell them we can feel their prayers. Tell them we know their hearts. And that's what gives us the strength and the faith to do this work. Make sure they know this. We are very grateful. Bless them."

The Center For Soviet-American Dialogue may be contacted by calling Bellevue, Washington (206) 641-5026; Washington, DC (202) 543-7301; or New York City (212) 353-0001.