



JOHN DE VAULT

Born a quarter century ago from the ashes of Cold Mountain, a gestalt centre, Hollyhock aims at helping visitors integrate their lives with nature, spirit and creativity.

Charity begins at Hollyhock centre

Cortes Island campus sustains mission by making a leap to non-profit status

LISA MIRIAM CHERRY
Special to the Times Colonist

Twenty-seven years ago, Rex Weyler discovered that fortune-telling Gypsies can predict futures beyond our comprehension. At the 1981 Vancouver Folk Festival, a Hungarian Roma woman gazed at one of his rings and prophesied that red hollyhocks would play an important role in his life.

Here's what a further premonition might have told: He would find the hollyhocks on Cortes Island, he would help develop a retreat centre that would be named after the red flowers and the centre would bring together some of the leaders and leaders-to-be of the social change movement.

Grace, in the form of one investor after another, did help Hollyhock to grow into a renowned retreat centre on the West Coast, and the serendipity still stuns Weyler to this day.

"One of our first slogans was this: 'Seminars in the practical, creative and healing arts.' That sums it up — a balanced life. Included in the practical were sessions on organics, gardening, and ecology. Hollyhock specifically avoided being simply a place to investigate spiritual or psychological experiences," says Weyler, who was also one of the founders of Greenpeace.

"We did not want to focus on transcending physical life or tend toward narcissistic self-absorption, but rather help people integrate their life with nature, spirit and creativity."

And they have. For a quarter century, this formula has worked. So why change a good thing?

On the surface, it looked good, as a green business, but its board members weren't sure how much longer it could sustain itself. After a long, hard look, their intuition told them there was only one way to survive into the 21st century: Become a charitable foundation.

And, after becoming the prerequisite non-profit organization last year, Hollyhock's transformation to a charitable foundation will occur this spring, as current shareholders have donated their ownership. It was a radical step, but something Hollyhock's CEO says needed to be done.

"Succession planning was a big driver," says Joel Solomon. "Secondly, though we strongly believe in business with a social-purpose mission, realistically, these concepts remain new to most."

"As our next 50-year vision emerges, we know we need substantial amounts of capital investment to green our campus, expand our program globally via the Internet, broaden the number of societal leaders who can make use of the offerings, and many other improvements to serve our increasingly sophisticated audience."

So, when courses on every-

thing from painting to cooking to non-violent communication are offered this spring and summer, recipients can take heart that they're not just paying for a course, they're investing in Hollyhock itself.

Born from the ashes of Cold Mountain, a gestalt centre, Hollyhock has been host in the past 25 years to countless luminaries in the arts and sciences such as Dr. Andrew Weil, Alan Watts, Alan Ginsberg, Governor General's Literary Award winner Robin Blaser and dozens more.

It strove to be a centre where people transcended their perspectives not just through the wisdom imported by these teachers but by the expanse of ocean at its doorstep, the hundreds of overflowing, bright bushy ferns edging the walking trails, kayaking under the cascading layers of stars at night. It became known as a centre far from the distractions of home, where people could get in touch with themselves, where openings flowed easily.

Other models of self-growth centres existed across North America: Esalen, Omega, Ojai and New York Center being a few, but Weyler felt that the self-help "encounter group" phenomenon was too human-centred and self-centred. "Too narcissistic. The missing ingredient in human spirituality, I believed and still do, is nature," he says.

He wanted Hollyhock to teach people "how to 're-sacralize' nature and re-integrate our human society into nature."

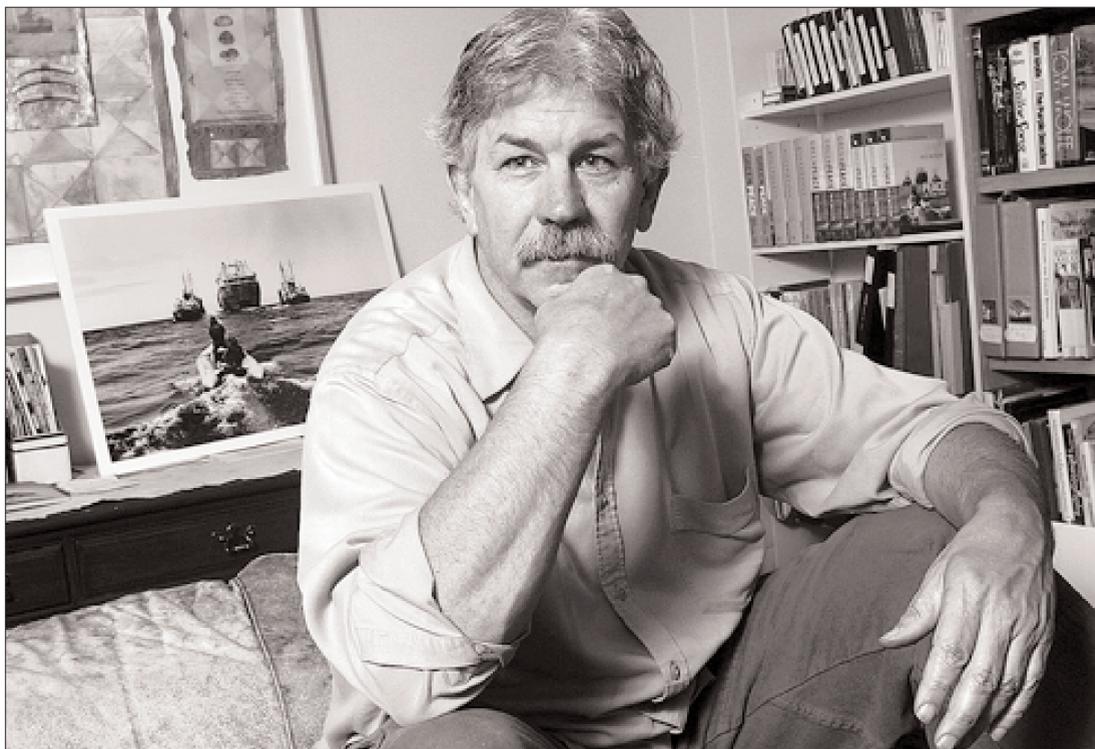
Gordon Wheeler, president of the renowned Esalen Institute in California, says it is forward-thinking for Hollyhock to become a charitable foundation, as it's the prime way for such centres to survive.

"Traditionally, going non-profit has meant opening up a channel of donor support in support of your mission. Now in addition, one of the greatest threats to the viability of retreat centres like Hollyhock and Esalen is the ever-escalating land value of the location itself. In the face of this kind of speculative development pressure, non-profit status means a measure of protection for these magic sites and their rich mission legacies."

"Today, the world is ever more in need of these special incubators of alternative visions and creative solutions. We have more than enough beachfront luxury resorts for the very affluent in our troubled world, but not nearly enough Hollyhocks and Esalens."

Back in B.C., Dr. Jock McKee, who founded another natural haven, The Haven on Gabriola, with fellow psychiatrist Dr. Ben Wong, agrees with Wheeler and Solomon. A self-development centre that focuses on psychology, Haven made the transition to charitable status in 2004.

"Ben and I put our heart and



CHUCK RUSSELL, CAN WEST NEWS SERVICE

Rex Weyler, an original member of Greenpeace, has been the driving force behind the retreat centre on Cortes Island.



CANWEST NEWS SERVICE

A perceptive prophesy about hollyhocks has blossomed.



FLORENCE TETRAULT

Along with the potential for spiritual awakening and appreciation of the natural world, the Hollyhock centre offers some pretty funky physical sanctuaries.

soul into the creation of the Haven Institute school. As we faced retirement, we wanted to establish a structure that would assure the longevity of the Haven project," McKee says.

"Transferring the ownership from a for-profit corporation into a non-profit charity was a way to democratize the operation and to broaden the scope of ownership, decision-making and direction of the institute in a financially efficient way."

In Weyler's mind, it all comes down to the sacred. And he tells a story which distills the essence of it all:

In 1980, he went to the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, while working on a story for *New Age Journal*. There, he met traditional

Lakota chief Fools Crow. The Lakota people were struggling to save their land from uranium mining and their people from vigilante violence. Fools Crow, who had a house burned down and relatives shot, told Rex: "The best way to help native people is to find a place where you can stay and protect that place."

His words impressed Weyler as "a profound, anti-intellectual approach to ecology and justice. 'I had studied and written about social change and world religions. I had practised Buddhist meditation and environmental activism. Yet, Fools Crow's formula spoke to living one's values every day with every breath.'"

A year later, he came to

Cortes Island and, for the first time, observed the land and buildings on the campus now called Hollyhock.

"I felt a strong devotion to the place. Inspired by the encounter with Fools Crow, I dreamed of a human settlement that displayed respect for nature as a first principle — a respect for the land, the sea, the groundwater, the otters and the winter wrens."

"This was the one critical piece that remained important to me: Go beyond our own human comforts and awareness to appreciate the intelligence in nature, the stuff we come from. This, I still believe, is a key to benign human existence on the Earth."

Yet, a steady stream of fund-

ing is crucial, Solomon says. "As 45 people owning and stewarding together, with no one in majority, as we age and die off, it was increasingly clear that it is our responsibility to figure out how to protect this land and mission longer term."

Shelley Kean says little has changed over the 25 years that she has been a frequent guest at Hollyhock.

"The essence of the place is still exactly the same. It's still a healing, nurturing, peaceful place where a person can be taken care of, where there is kindness and beauty and a purity that is so sorely lacking in the rest of the world."

For more about Hollyhock, visit the website www.hollyhock.ca.