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DO MAKE SAY THINK

## Art, business and social justice collide at beachside Hollyhock retreat

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VANCOUVER — Special to The Globe and Mail

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*Do Make Say Think is the name of a Canadian rock band, but we also thought the title was a good one for a weekly summer series introducing readers to British Columbians out of the public eye who are doing things, making things, saying things and thinking things. This week, for Do, we drop in at the Hollyhock retreat on Cortes Island.*

Cora Moret picks me up at the float-plane dock in a dusty blue minivan. Ms. Moret, a former Nanaimo-based salmon biologist for the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, moved to Cortes Island with her husband and two young children last year. She's now a naturalist guide for Hollyhock – a retreat centre founded here in 1983 – and a part-time shuttle driver on busy arrival days.

“It’s amazing,” she says when I ask how her family is adjusting. “We love it here.”

Besides a powdery beach and an incredible one-acre garden – a French-intensive riot of lettuce, herbs, rhubarb and purple ornamental alliums the size of basketballs – it encompasses apple orchards, cedar and hemlock forest, and roaming, hard-to-startle deer.

Those that visit Hollyhock do so for the getaway and partly to attend sessions at the annual Social Change Institute (SCI) – a big-tent gathering of progressives in business, the arts and the non-profit sector. I was slightly concerned about the SCI portion; as a middle-aged dad on five-day leave, my primary interest was not culture-jamming so much as dissolving my consciousness via evening hot tubs, deep-tissue massages and cabernet sauvignon. I wasn’t sure how the two realities – earnest solution-seeking and escapist indulgence – would square. All I’d known about SCI before I arrived was that the keynote speaker would be 46-year-old Lennox Yearwood, leader of the Hip Hop Caucus, a Washington-based group that rallies urban youth to vote and protest. Along with a white clerical collar, “The Rev” (as he likes to be called) has been known to wear a black baseball cap stacked with three bold white words: AGITATE! AGITATE! AGITATE! Not exactly the sentiment you expect amidst yoga sessions and aromatherapy treatments.

Hollyhock is Canada’s answer to the Esalen Institute – the Big Sur, Calif.-based hub of syncretic East-West philosophy that has been hosting personal development courses for over 50 years (and that has gotten much recent buzz thanks to the *Mad Men* finale).

Both places attract and enlist artists, intellectuals and business people. Hollyhock faculty and visitors have included everyone from Allen Ginsberg and Robert Bly to singer/composer Ysaye Barnwell, actor Gillian Anderson and “green-collar” jobs advocate Van Jones.

In recent years, Hollyhock has reframed its mission, shifting from being a rejuvenation space for exhausted urbanites into more of an empowerment centre teaching “inner skills” to entrepreneurs and culture-shifters. The Social Change Institute, an annual event for more than 10 years, is part of that.

“What comes naturally out of some rejuvenation and being in the natural world, in a calm and peaceful environment, is it provides some space to go deep inside yourself, and to learn to lead from there,” Dana Bass Solomon, Hollyhock’s CEO, says.

“What’s rare and unique to Hollyhock is our blending of those inner personal skills with leadership and becoming more of a good citizen, educator or professional of any kind. That might look like learning how to meditate and be thoughtful and slow our judgment process down ... where instead of reacting, you can respond to life and situations in a deeper way.”

## **The M-word**

The kick-off for SCI was Mr. Yearwood’s keynote speech, which framed climate change as a civil-rights issue. “People in poor communities, and people of colour, are disproportionately affected by polluting industries and by climate change,” Mr. Yearwood says, after telling the story of a girl

who lived downwind of a coal-fired power plant and died of an asthma attack.

“In the past we fought for equality. Now we are also fighting for *existence*.”

I began to suspect that wake-up calls, rather than escaping into the coastal lull, were going to be my destiny on Cortes Island. Mr. Yearwood grew up with civil-rights leaders Coretta Scott King and Stokely Carmichael in his living room, and now he lives with his family in an area of Washington where residents hear far more gunfire and police sirens than crickets and birdsong. But he appreciates what Hollyhock does.

“It’s important in a movement, particularly as we become more of a digital movement, to ‘press flesh,’” he says. “It’s important to touch. And to see. To look folks in the eye.”

Looking folks in the eye was one part of the daily Deep Leadership morning sessions led by facilitator Gibran Rivera. Mr. Rivera asked participants to gather in small groups and answer four questions: “What brings you joy? What do you desire? Where are you going? How do you love?” The sudden intimacies were unnerving for many, myself included, but they achieved their purpose: creating a community on short notice.

“The first time I came here, it wasn’t just the beauty of the land that got me hooked,” Mr. Rivera says. “It was the magic I found here.”

The word magic gets used a lot around Hollyhock. Like the words “community” and “spiritual,” it’s vague and New Agey enough to be annoying without your own reference point. So I should admit that, to my own surprise, I actually experienced something that might justify the M-word. Without going into the personal details, I’ll just say I experienced some unexpected inner shifts. It was as if I’d gotten two years of therapy in a weekend – and without really doing anything.

It was all just suddenly there, ripe, ready and falling to the ground before I could stop it.

## **Salad days**

The vegetarian meals at Hollyhock are appended by massive bowls of fresh garden greens and legendary yeast dressing, a single recipe that sells many of its cookbooks. Over one such lunch, I hung out with Amanda Lewis, an editor at Penguin Random House in Toronto. Like many SCI attendees, she leads multiple lives: editor but also yoga instructor, the founder of Toronto’s annual Reading Line book ride and the chair of communications for Toronto350.org [<http://350.org/>].

This was her first visit to Hollyhock after hoping to travel there for years, and she’d already become something of a groupie.

“I love the setting, the people, the food, the garden ... and the morning row to a neighbouring island.”

She saw the setting and SCI's often troubling ecological and social content as complementary. "Hollyhock enables people to tap into different aspects of themselves," she said. "It makes conflict resolution and hard discussions much more palatable and easy to work through."

By Day 5, I'd ticked off my list of middle-aged dad escapisms: I got my massage, my cabernet, my evening hot tubs. I even got in a sunset kayak trip, where I was treated to curious seals and lion's mane jellyfish. I had drunk the organic Kool-Aid, and it was good. Before checking out, I bought an aromatherapy spray from the gift shop. It was the perfect souvenir.

Made by a local Cortes herbalist, its ingredient list included "a synergistic blend of essential oils" and "fairy magic."

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