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Dancing Across the Golden Bridge

Fresh out of college many years ago Melissa Michaels went to the Auroville plateau. There she discovered, as so many of us have discovered, the joy of being with Tamil children. Blessed with a vision of movement as the universal language of the world, she realized that she wanted to use dance to call forth the unrealized possibilities of not just Tamil children but children of the whole earth.

She returned to Boulder, Colorado and began the process of developing what is now called Golden Bridge, “dedicated to birthing a generation of globally conscious, embodied, spiritual leaders” through rites of passage programs that use movement to address issues blocking development.

Golden Bridge now offers a variety of programs to people of all ages. A complete description of her work is available at GoldenBridge.org. Please go there and be inspired.

In this issue of Connect we profile Melissa and the stories of some of the many Aurovilians who have attended her “Surfing the Creative” camps, beginning in 2000. We begin with Melissa's story, excerpted from the Golden Bridge website.

At the age of twenty-one, with my undergraduate studies completed, I hungered for something I had not found in the classrooms of academia. Longing for connection with something bigger than the world as I knew it, I chose to journey far away from the safety and routine of my life. Airlifted by fate, I landed in a small village in South India. For months, I taught dozens of Tamil children, ranging from 4 – 8 years old. Our classes were held in the embrace of the branches of a huge Banyan tree. With no knowledge of their language, I turned to the only vehicle for communication we had in common … our bodies.

Each morning, bright-eyed children delighted to imitate my every gesture, greeted me. I found myself moving in ways I never imagined possible. Using my body for anything other than numbing my pain was a real stretch. Yet, my enthusiasm guided me to jump and roll, to do whatever it took to explain to these curious young learners the basics of addition and subtraction. I would contort my body into funny shapes, creating moving images to describe their vocabulary words.

Meanwhile, my young Tamil “students” were busy teaching me. Their nimble hands crafted beautiful dolls from scraps, as they learned to sew and weave with their mamas. They constantly tended to one another, brushing and stroking each other’s hair with great devotion. Out of nowhere, their voices would spontaneously rise up together in the middle of cooking their meal of local grains, simply because someone felt like singing. These young people were naturally embodied; a state of being that I, as a Western girl, would take years to access.

One particular morning when I was alone with the children and completely lost in my work of trying to explain things with my antics, a demanding voice began speaking to me from within. Disoriented, I leaned onto a great root of our Banyan tree as this wave of intense energy washed through me. I felt like I was hearing the cries of the children all over the world. Images of wide-open, colorful faces were moving before me as if the children from all directions were literally calling. Their hunger and innocence was so intense that I could barely stand. A message was being delivered intravenously into my soul: “The Children of the world are calling. You will help raise the children that will help raise the children of the world.”

This mandate has guided my journey ever since.

In that poignant moment far from the shores of the familiar, I came home to myself like I never had before. A date with destiny was made. Not only were the children of the world calling, but my soul was calling too. I knew that the universal language of movement was where our conversation would begin.

Decades have passed since that fateful day. Over the years, I have responded to the call by creating movement based education programs for diverse people throughout the life cycle. What began as Small World Dancers® for elementary school-aged children has grown to the Dance of Birth for families in the birth cycle; to the Women’s Blossom Project for maidens transforming into women; to Surfing the Creative®, a rites of passage process for diverse youth on the path to adulthood; to Shakti Sisterhood®, a process where diverse women come together to open into the majesty and responsibility of being visionary leaders, social entrepreneurs, and positive change agents in these
vulnerable and powerful times. Responding to the evolving needs of my students, I now have the privilege of working with hundreds of gifted and dedicated emerging leaders around the world, many who also aim to serve children, women, youth, diverse peoples in their unique communities through the arts of body, heart, and soul.

Recognizing that so many people around the world, starting with myself, had lost connection with their instincts, with their authentic ways of expression, and ultimately with their soul’s missions and their will to actualize their dreams, I dedicated my work to the rebirth of our instinctual consciousness, our capacities to feel life fully and to love deeply as a result of that.

Through the Backdoor
Interview with Kalya

I was one of 7 children of a very poor family, the only child from my family who got into Auroville. I went to Andre’s school at New Creation. Basically I was adopted by Andre and his wife. So I grew up in New Creation and then went to Last School. I finished without going to college or further studies.

Then I met Aurelio who told me that he would select 2 students from Auroville who could be sent to US for doing a program with Melissa Michaels. I had never met or known her. I sent my information and she selected me and Satyavan. We were the first batch from Auroville to go to Melissa’s program.

When I first went to the US Consulate in Chennai they of course said no to my visa, but after a few weeks I got a call from the Consulate telling me that I could come and collect my visa. “This is the first time we are recalling someone like this who’s been rejected,” they said, “you can come to the backdoor (the entrance for US citizens to meet people at the consulate) to get the visa.” Then I thought that I was meant to go. We had been rejected and Melissa got this changed in the US—I tell you she can do anything!

At that time I was staying in Aspiration, mostly playing basketball and just roaming around doing nothing. Everybody in Auroville thought; What is this kid going to do? The only thing he does is basketball. I would sometimes go with Johnny and Paul and do some tree planting. That’s what I was interested in—just go plant trees.

It was 2000 when I went to US. When we traveled to Colorado, Melissa had friends who met us in each and every airport and guided us through them. She made sure we were safe. When we got there to the camp everybody was waiting because they didn’t know how somebody from India would look. I stepped in. I saw her and immediately I connected with her. It’s like you cry, you just fall in front of her. She’s like a guru you see in India. You go and you immediately feel her to be just like your mom and your eyes fill with tears. It’s like you have missed your mom for 20 years; that’s how I felt meeting her.

Then I turned and saw a kid sitting there and I knew him from Auroville many years back: Jeremy Roske. We connected and then I had a friend. I was a very shy kid who would talk but not do movement and dance. I was not into that. I was doing theater because I can talk. But then I got there with Melissa and wow you express, you let go, whatever. It’s amazing. All of my hidden feelings just came out. Suddenly you feel people crying around you. I thought oh these guys are funny crying here and crying there. And one fine day came and I was crying. You see these people crying in front of Melissa and somebody falling. She will go and console them and I would think oh that’s a bit weird. How can somebody cry in the middle of these 50 people? One day came and I was doing the same thing and after that I was completely free. I was not heavy anymore.

In the US I would go to some market and Melissa was always having one eye on me. She would tell somebody to make sure that I was at the right place. Not going in the wrong place. Even my mom never did that to me. So I always felt safe.

After the program she found out that my ticket was good till the end of the year so she said no, no you’re not going back—do something here—you like landscaping. (I had done some landscaping with Francoise in Auroville), let’s find somebody who can teach you. Why do you want to waste your visa?

So she found a landscaping company and got me in it to do some practice. That company paid me for each hour and the boss liked me a lot. He let me handle one project by myself. I did it and he was so happy. He said stay here and I will pay you. I told him no, no the US is not my place—Auroville is my place. I didn’t want to work more.

Then Melissa asked why not meet people from Auroville and she sent me to Bill Leon in Seattle. I went and met him and spent a lot of time there. It was so nice. It was also part of Melissa’s program to go to Hummingbird Farm in New Mexico where the Roske family lives. That’s where everything started to change for me. I had a dream which I didn’t believe in at the time but when I came back to Auroville it was the base of my work that you see right here.

At Hummingbird I dreamt of flying. I was flying from my mom’s house to New Creation along the path I used to walk as a child to go to school through the tamarind tree grove. And after a few months I came back from the US and met Ananda who told me I should go back to New Creation. So after a few months I found that I was guided to go back to New Creation.

I went there and started my office in a small shed. Then I built a new building with a small pond in the front—that was 8 years ago. Now I’m here at Sanskrit school where I did my studies with Last School. Same places, different story.

There was a time when this Sanskrit School building was really falling apart. Too many cracks, nobody was ready to take care. All the electrical and plumbing lines were gone. It was eaten by termites. There was no money in Auroville to care for this building.

Renovated Sanskrit School
I applied to SAIER and said I can do this. This is a beautiful building, maybe it is time that I take care of it. They asked me if I can financially manage. I could sell my office, get money from my landscaping projects and that’s what I did with what I have. My future idea is to landscape this whole area around NESS, Sanskrit School and Last School and make a big garden, a big project. Basically I don’t come from a rich family. I don’t have anything which is given by my parents. I have to earn. Everytime I earn I put it in Auroville actually. I do something here.

I don’t think I would have gone this far if I had not done Melissa’s camp. I don’t know the right word for it but it completely changed me. I was spinning a different way and she changed me. That was needed. I needed to change. Without that I’m sure I wouldn’t be doing this now.

### Auroville From Different Angles

#### Interview with Satyavan

I was born in Auroville and did all my schooling in Auroville. In 2000 I went to the states to do Melissa’s program with Kalya. It was a new experience for us because we had never left the country before.

I had been to the Himalayas with the Auroville school but seeing the mountains in Colorado was different. The teachings gave us a lot of inspiration about things and we brought that back to Auroville. The workshop helped us to see Auroville from different angles, from outside and to relate Melissa’s teaching to the ideals of Auroville and its reality. We learned how things can move towards the ideals of Auroville. All this is harder to put into words than to feel it and know it inside.

We also did a permaculture course at Hummingbird Ranch in New Mexico which helped us by being in nature, camping out and studying actually in the forest which was more like in Auroville. So here the learning process was more concrete. Our teachers, Josh and Scott, were very helpful because they had learned from the founders of permaculture. They took us to their houses and showed us what they had created which was shocking and beautiful—to see how many things can grow in a small space without any plants taking over each other. Each plant looked very healthy.

After that program we went and stayed at the town of Netherlands in Colorado. We worked with a guy who was an ex-colonel with a big 300 acre fenced place. There was a little forest. We did mechanics. I am a mechanic so we put a car back together with him. He used to drive around feeding his rabbits by throwing food out of the car. Shocking to see the wild rabbits eat out of his hand. He was very connected to nature and present in his place.

Right now I’ve got a place with an old house that I’m rebuilding, an open field, and a forest of mostly mahogany trees started from a big one that blew down in the cyclone. I want to transfer some of the seedlings to Rishi’s Kamataru forest.

I also want to have a place for young people to live, work and learn about the origins of Auroville and its ideals. This would involve a cafe and places for them to stay.

In addition, I’m repairing old cars for people. I’ve refinished an Ambassador with zebra stripes. I’m also working on a food truck for a Dutch fellow who wants to drive it around India, feed people and listen and record their stories.

### An Independent Life

#### Interview with Rajaveni

I started to work in Auroville 27 years ago in Verite community and became an Aurovilian 16 years ago. What brought me to Auroville was being in a big family with so many girls. When my sisters had arranged marriages it scared me, but I didn’t run away. I informed my family that I did not want to be married off like my sisters. My family thought I’d be okay because I seemed more independent. In the beginning they were a little bit troubled about me staying alone in Verite, but afterwards they understood and were supporting me. My family fully trusted the Verite Community as a good place for me to work and live. They didn’t worry because where Verite is situated had been my family land which they sold to Auroville. I have grown up in these fields and my family lived here. That’s why I came here. I started my life a new way at Verite.

I didn’t think education was so important to me, but when I came to work in Verite I realized that education is important for everybody. I didn’t know how to do math. I couldn’t even write my name. Verite sent me to Ilangarkal School in the evening to learn English and Tamil. Two Verite community members gave me classes after work. I realized then how important learning was.

Melissa’s program . . . well, if I start to tell about it I will cry because the first time I went I was really scared. I didn’t know how I could live for 3 months in the program. But the way Melissa taught brought me a new life and I became more independent. I learned I could be a leader and a guide. I also could help other people, especially elders and children. I learned to be a woman and a mother. The camp gave me more courage and more power. It’s not about becoming rich or getting money. I didn’t learn anything about that from her. From her I learned how to be with other people. How to be a human being. I learned to go in a good direction which is independent but doesn’t hurt others. This is what I learned in the first camp. I have been to 5 camps and now I am going again from July 23 to August 7. I will be a leader.
there and working with the children.

People come from many countries to Melissa’s workshop: Africa, Brazil and of course many Americans. It is dance. Each time the dance happens you bring all your happiness and sadness out while you dance. When I went I thought okay only Indian people have problems. Maybe white people don’t have any problems. Once I entered it I saw: everyone not only me, not only us, everyone has problems. And they share their sadness. They share openly. People in our culture never share their problems because if I tell you, then you tell everyone in the village and then everyone is talking about me. All the girls here keep their sadness hidden. I no longer hold my sadness. I don’t hold anything. I let The Mother take care of all that.

At Mohanam Culture Center I use what I learned from Melissa. At the center we have a group of 15 ladies. I am part of that group. On Saturday and Sunday we do cultural activities with tourists, guests and friends of Auroville. During the week we do classes with children from the villages.

The other thing I have is Lively which is a business that sells the products my team of 7 families produces. This is a small business with the families feeling very happy to be there. This is my independence. I work there making kolam designs for the bags and t-shirts. I love that work. I design the clothes with kolam decoration. We started with bags, t-shirts and wallhangings of kolams. Through that Lively workshop I brought my kolam art to the business. I have taught kolam workshops in Germany and I will teach the children kolams at Melissa’s camp kolams. I teach kolams in the local schools and I give kolam workshops to guests at Veritie. My focus is to bring the kolam alive. It is beautiful and people love it.

I work and live in Verite, taking care of the guesthouse. I have to be available whenever needed. We have people who cook, clean and garden which we supervise. Then we have to receive guests whenever they arrive. I have to be very open to trust people who work here for the guest house.

My family situation brought me to Auroville and Auroville brought me to Melissa’s camp. There are two things that have made for me an independent life.

My Life Changed
Interview with Balu of Mohanam

I was born and brought up in Sanjeevinagar, not far from Auroville. I have lived in Auroville for the last 17 years. I’ve been connected to Auroville since I was 13 years old. I came through my grandfather. He was someone who supplied a big team of labor for digging the foundation of the Matrimandir. My family had land in Auroville near the Auroville community of what is now called Maduca and Samasthi. My mother used to tell me the story that when I was in her belly they sold that land because there was no water there. Then the whole family moved to Sanjeevinagar.

This is the story of the way I came into Auroville with its colorful soil and flowers. Colorful people. As a young child I wondered, what’s happening there where everyone looks like strangers?

To begin with, I have to be grateful to Bhavana and Village Action for its school program. After 10th grade I got a helping job working with local children with Bhavana and Aurelio during my school holidays. When Melissa was in Auroville she had worked at Village Action. Bhavana told me about her and she and Aurelio recommended me for Melissa’s program.

What I experienced with Melissa and her friends in the Golden Bridge camp was that my life changed. I repeat: MY LIFE CHANGED. To go there was my first time getting into a plane. I almost started to cry. Because at that time in my village when people saw a plane in the sky they would say that the white people in the plane will come and kidnap you if you were not listening to your parents. So when a plane was flying overhead we kids would all run and hide in a bush because all the grandmothers in the village said this to us. For me putting my feet into the plane was amazing and then arriving in Colorado and meeting Melissa there for the first time was incredible and powerful. She’s really a very special person in my life.

The tools that she gave me, whatever I do today this is the base for me: She opened me. And the whole program was a great tool and medicine for me.

I was 26 when I went to Colorado for my first workshop with Melissa in 2006. Rajaveni, who is now my wife, went with me. There were 50 people in the one month intensive camp at that time. All the youth were from 8 different countries.

Melissa brought me healing through art and dance. The way she taught made it so that I could connect with my father. Also heal with him. I was 6 months old when he died. Yet she connected me to my father through her guidance I could talk to him. I could say how I could love him and how he can love me. This came through her.

At the camp I really understood who I am and what is really going on with me. From what I learned there it seems like every year a different chakra opens in me. I understand now what is the experience in my body and what is going on outside my body and what is going on around me. What she gave me is a medicine and it is still there. I know the experience of the camp still teaches me, like she opened me to the fire inside of me. I will never forget her and what she offered me. Very intense and personal.

I am trying to set up and organize a way to share what I learned through Mohanam Cultural Center and the Bamboo Center for people who come from the cities in India. But my dream is always to empower the youth and help them enter entrepreneurship. Every year we get 20 to 50 youth for leadership training at Mohanam Cultural Center. I use the tools that I learned from Melissa to
help these young people develop themselves. From Melissa's work I understand that you have to know who you are to have a business. Even the Bamboo Center, which is my business, I use what I learned from Melissa.

Everyone in Auroville talks about the need to empower the youth. That is what I do. Melissa lifted the fire inside. The spirit. I understand how as a family we are all from different countries, cultures, backgrounds, languages, but we had one language working with her when we moved and danced together. Her amazing leadership lead us to become brothers and sisters in a world or spiritual family.

We Are a Family
Interview with Jeremy Roske

I first came to Auroville when I was 12 with my family. I was connected with Seyril Schochen, my godmother, who was here in the early days of Auroville. Seyril is the link to Melissa Michaels of whom we are speaking about today.

I connected with Melissa when I was 15. I’ve been a performer my whole life, touring when I was 13, 14, and 15 all over the US as a musician and dancer. She was doing her movement work, which was inspired by the 5 Rhythms of Gabrielle Roth, with kids in the community of Boulder. She was searching for a way to help support young people in becoming more embodied and empowered leaders.

That led to the first international program that Melissa put on. I was around 20 at the time and participated in that event. That was in a sense the beginning of Golden Bridge. I don’t know what year exactly Golden Bridge was started but I’m saying that I feel like I was involved from the beginning of that work. It has been a very essential part to my development and to my growth as a creative being and an emotionally intelligent person—someone who is inspired and committed to supporting the children of the world to get what they need to move forward in their lives.

I have had the honor and blessing to continue to work with Melissa over the last 20 years and as a youth leader for many of her programs and as a musician within her programs as well and as a continued support to bridging what is happening in the US, in Colorado and with the family here in Auroville. We are a family. So that support and that kind of continuation and deepening of the work as we move into our lives is needed. We can understand things but how we put them into our practice and into our life is a really important thing. How can we make it a dynamic aspect of our everyday experience? This is a big passion for me.

My work is influenced by the mentorship of Melissa and the community that has formed around Golden Bridge. I’ve been in Auroville off and on for the last 12 years teaching Capoeira, which is an art form I have spent about 20 years practicing. I worked in the theater scene here—I’m a trained actor. I’ve directed and acted in different Auroville productions. I’ve been in the Auroville choir. I’m also a performing musician and have connected with other Auroville musicians. I’ve done a lot of work with Mohanam Cultural Center. And with Balu, Rajaveni and Gnanivel.

I’ve been working primarily with the young boys here. I teach a multitude of skills I’ve picked up over the years. In the same way as Melissa I’m helping to support these village youth to have more opportunities and groundedness especially in the area of life skills/communication skills. With Balu, myself and others we have offered sound movement experiences to the community. That was a great experience. This has been an honor and a joy to be supported by a family and community that is focused on empowerment. The story continues as I live each day in Auroville.

I Bring My Energy to the Dance Floor
Interview with Gnanivel

I’m from Alankuppam village which is very close to Auroville. It was in 2007 exactly 10 years ago that I went to Colorado for Melissa’s camp. At the time I was doing a lot of social work. I worked with Balu at Mohanam Cultural Center. We started a small project of making musical instruments at the same time. This cultural work which we have started was connected with Melissa when she was here, 20 years ago when she first came to Auroville.

I was in Boulder at her workshop for 6 weeks. In returning to my life in Auroville I brought this work back to the next level. I still like to do the expressive dance Melissa taught which is called Arya; This is the way I am bringing some energy to other people. When I am doing the dance in Verite each week, I bring my energy to the dance floor there. I also go to Unity Pavilion with the Sound Bath group. When we give sound bath it is like a spiritual relaxation for the people, where I can also give them the space and atmosphere to relax. I have been doing Sound Bath work for these 10 years since I went to Boulder.

The work at Swaram which I fully put my time into is creating musical instruments.

The Five Rhythms

Gabrielle Roth identified a process of movement that incorporates 5 different rhythms which, all together, are called a wave. It begins as the flow rhythm, very much a fluid movement. The second rhythm is staccato with a focus on the outbreath. The third is chaos which is a release of the body. The fourth is lyrical which is an uplifting quality. What you feel after a big cry. You get a sense of lightness.

Imagine a wave coming up and peaking in the staccato and crashing in a chaotic way. Then it rolls up onto the beach in this extensive lyrical form. Then it comes back and the last one, the fifth, is stillness. So this is connected to emotional territory. Melissa was in one of her first batches of students. So that became the foundation for her work.

—Jeremy Roske | jeremyroske.com
**Taking the Big Leap**

**By Chandra De Dionigi**

It began as a serendipitous discovery: my mother had read that Melissa was offering a one-week program here in Auroville and decided to enroll both of us for it (even if I wasn’t initially very keen). It was there that I connected with Melissa and had a glimpse of the beautiful space she creates on and off the dance floor.

Then Melissa invited me personally; she made me feel so welcome and special, the camp seemed to be an amazing opportunity to discover myself through another world that was out there, ready to be explored. I was quite young (16) and full of inhibitions, so I had doubts and fears, it seemed to be a big leap to take. But in the end, I received a much needed push from someone close and I made it.

During the program I was struck by how free and uninhibited most of the young Americans (especially the girls) were or seemed to be. They used a completely different language from the one I was accustomed to, they spoke from their hearts, giving room to their emotions and inner processes, sharing them freely. It inspired and changed me fundamentally. A part of me adopted that way of being, feeling and communicating.

The place was heaven. Melissa created a safe haven amidst trees and mountains, it brought us closer to nature, hence to ourselves. The activities were well balanced and varied. But most of the time was dedicated to exploring one’s own self, through the powerful cycle of the five elements. I was confronted with some aspects of myself that I shied away from, and I had to face them through the dance. I realize now, more than ten years later, that only now I have learned to dance with dance. I realize now, more than ten years later, that only now I have learned to dance with dance.

In Colorado I was shocked to see people dancing without any discipline. I mean, no proper steps and no choreography, all moving like crazy people and I felt awkward looking at them. Actually, I was judging…….? I felt very uncomfortable. I started to sit aside; the only thing I was attracted to was Melissa’s calm voice with her amazing music groups.

We had a circle time - every one of them shared their diversity of culture, their color problems, abuse in their life and addiction. Hearing all those problems I was telling myself that I am not alone in this world.

All her activities were difficult for me, like the boundary exercise, art work, the Five Rhythms, mother, father, wild child, ceremonies and writing your feelings after each dance. I felt I was in the wrong place for sure. In the end I asked myself a question, did I get any answer from this work?

**My Transformation**

**By Savithri**

I studied dance as my profession and I believe that dance is one of the paths to reach God. I used to teach dance in several schools in Auroville and outside schools.

I was a wonderful actor in my personal life. My biggest talent was, I could cover all my problems with my smile and lies. I was trapped with my own falsehood. Acting happy outside and trying to hide myself from my own people. The only thing I had was my dance. My dance became my closest friend. With that I can share anything and we cried together a lot. There I can feel ‘ME’.

One day I was in my classroom with my 48 students circling me and we were talking about the upcoming competition in our school. I wanted to show them a Youtube Bharatanatyam dance performance. I chanced upon a video with a pretty girl on the screen who was talking with tears in her eyes. It was Melissa. I wrote an email to Melissa and she selected me for the camp.

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After coming back to Auroville, I realized that the work had a great impact on me. I couldn’t understand my colleagues, my relationships, my needs. I couldn’t fit with my surroundings. I was confused about everything. You know this feeling … you think that you are sleeping, but after three hours you are still awake. I don’t know how to explain this properly. Obviously, I struggled a lot, but everything turned towards the good. So I’m happy about it.

Now I can see how much Melissa’s program impacted me. I have learned how to look at myself, my behavior, what I have expected from others so I could see my own self. I realized I never set a limit on my relations. This need to change. I no longer want to be a victim. Melissa’s way of teaching taught me a boundary and how to control anger when you are in a relationship or argument and the limitation of expressing your anger.

“I pretended to be asleep.” These thoughts kept me awake. I wanted to be like Melissa in many ways, sweet with spice. She can share her love for everyone in the same way like her own children. She has the strength to help anybody in any circumstance. Looking at her pure beauty and beautiful soul, I really admire her. She helped me to stand up to support myself in a different way and made me strong and confident to help others who are in the same situation too. This guided me to work with a Delhi NGO (trafficking children and women) and I felt I did a pretty good job.

Now when people from Auroville see me on the road or anywhere my friends, family members they are telling me one thing – that is, I look strong. They say it with a lot of respect. They tell me I have changed in a good way; that I look more clear. I’m getting this kind of feedback these days and I do believe in that. It’s come about because of the struggle I went through.
An Ecovillage Design Course in Auroville

The diverse ecovillage movement began in the 1960’s and has spread around the world. Ecovillages are defined, according to Wikipedia as “traditional or intentional communities whose goal is to become more socially, culturally, economically and ecologically sustainable. Ecovillages are consciously designed through locally owned, participatory processes to regenerate and restore their social and natural environments.”

In 2005 a group of global educators who had founded Gaia Education met in Denmark and created a curriculum for a course in Ecovillage Design Education (EDE). The Gaia Education mission is to be “. . . a leading-edge provider of sustainability education that promotes thriving communities within planetary boundaries.”

Auroville has many characteristics of an ecovillage, particularly in its regeneration of land through afforestation. The Auroville greenbelt has always been a place where ecovillage values held sway. Thus Pitchandikulam has begun to serve as a center of ecovillage activities among members of YouthLink, an organization trying to provide more activities and facilities for Auroville youth that hasn’t aged yet.

In December 2016 the first EDE course was held in Auroville. Connect spoke with three of the planners and participants of that course: Kavitha, Nikki, and Ethan Hirschtauber.

Sustainable Habitation on the Planet

Interview with Ethan Hirschtauber

I have a long history with Auroville. I first came in 1998 at the age of 20 on a program called GeoCommons College Year which was a semester study program. My teachers were Daniel Greenberg and Abigail Linenan. I came through my college as a semester abroad program which allowed me to be here in Auroville for nine weeks.

It was a transformative time in my life. I was shifting between majors trying to figure out what I wanted to focus on. I had a lot of different passions. I was also looking at the situation in the world and how Auroville was dealing with it as well as other communities in the world. We looked at these issues during the semester, especially the shift in consciousness that is needed. That is what I was really woken up by.

The semester in Auroville was in the middle of my college education so that led me toward environmental studies. I completed my schooling in that major and went on to work in the environmental energy efficiency sector for 5 years.

Then I went back to school and got a masters degree for Teaching in Experiential Education at the Audubon Expedition Institute at Leslie University in Cambridge, Massachusetts. I did this because at the end of my time with Daniel and Abigail I had thought that I wanted to be an experiential teacher like they were when I finished that GeoCommons semester. Exactly 10 years later that’s what I got to do. I finished my master’s at Leslie by coming as a student teacher to assist in the Living Routes semester in 2009.

Then I worked for 4 years as faculty with Living Routes in Auroville from 2009 to 2012. I worked with a lot of different faculty. Most semesters were with Bindu and other Aurovilians. Lots of different students. Also one Tamil student from Auroville came in. That was a great way to bring the diversity of US students and local people who could also contribute and learn from each other. I grew a lot from that work. I got to be in Auroville for a long time.

I did try to go into the Entry Service to become an Aurovillian. Then when that didn’t work out I tried to become a friend of Auroville. By the time I left I was not able to become anything official within the community and so I was always a guest. But by the end of 4 years I felt Aurovilian in a way, that I was an emissary of the community informing people of what Auroville offers to students, many of whom would come back and spend a longer time here and some of those students joined. I liked being an outsider showing people what I loved about the community and what its challenges were.

I was travelling around Europe and did a semester for Living Routes in Israel. After that Living Routes closed down, and everyone faced difficult times losing their jobs. I kept getting involved in other communities. I began working for the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) with a job as office manager and organizer of GEN+ 20 which was a conference on the anniversary of the network held in 2015 in Findhorn.

Joss from Pitchandikulam and Kavitha from YouthLink attended. We started talking about a lot of different things like the Sustainable Living Institute (note: a Tamil Nadu government program based in Auroville that does training in traditional and sustainable practices) and how GEN could be more involved in Auroville. I felt GEN and Auroville were not connecting so much. Marti and Ambre, 2 Aurovilians, were attending GEN and trying to bring Auroville into the network but overall given 2,000 people in AV it seemed that only 2 people representing the community was very low. When Kavitha and Joss made a commitment to start a GEN desk in Auroville I came here for a month last year to help get the desk off the ground. I came to support Joss, Kavitha and Nikki.
We came up with the idea to do a mini eco design education (EDE) session to show Aurovilians what EDE could do here. Kavitha invited young Aurovilians to attend 2 days of the mini EDE to get a sense of the curriculum. We went about the community, working in groups together, so that those participating could learn about ecological practices they were not so aware of. It was two and a half intense days with 26 people in January of 2016.

Then we agreed to do a full EDE in 2017. We planned the dates for December into the new year. We went with GIA Education which certifies EDEs and started a conversation with them about certifying the EDE. That got it more official. We also got the United Nations certification which the EDE has through UNESCO which certifies its relationship to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a program that reinforces and promotes the UN’s SDGs. We were one of the first EDEs to get certified by the UN.

So all last year Joss and Kavitha and Nikki of the YouthLink team worked to develop an EDE. They had to get a place where people from the outside could stay. Joss renovated the eco dorm and the kitchen at Pitchandikulam, making it more livable for more people. They made it happen by getting all the different site visits and teachers/facilitators for the 5 week program on board.

What the month long EDE is for me is a chance to delve into what it is to build community together. It uses the 4 dimensional model to give the framework for community building: social, economic, world view, and integrated design, looking at sustainability from those perspectives in the context of an ecovillage where all those aspects are going on. The ultimate goal is to figure out how to live on this planet in a sustainable way.

For many years Auroville has been working on how human beings are going to live on this planet, how to grow in consciousness and not go down. Sometimes it looks like its happening. Auroville captures that really powerfully. How I see change happening over time is manifest in Auroville.

However most people in Auroville don’t identify the community as an ecovillage and don’t want to identify as one because they see Auroville as having so many other ideals. I feel that “ecovillage” is a really broad term that can identify any community that is working toward sustainable habitation on the planet. Auroville is definitely doing that. There are many things which fit perfectly into the concept of what an Eco Village is. Even if Auroville does not want to identify itself as an Eco Village the network looks to Auroville as a leading example of what a community can be. Those in the network do see it as a part of the Eco Village model as something to learn from.

In Auroville there are many ecovillage practices and aspects that are crucial to ecovillage design. There’s also a lot that Auroville can learn from the ecovillage network in terms of community building: techniques, social tools, some of the ways that people need to learn in order to live together. I did feel that many Aurovilians were receptive to the ecovillage concept even though they do not see Auroville as one.

Young Aurovilians in the course said, “Wow, this is a place where I have grown up and investigating it with others from outside makes me look at things in a new way.”

There were 36 participants. 16 were Aurovilians, 10 from Asia, 2 Sri Lankans, 1 Bhutanese, 2 South Africans, 9 from Europe, and others from different parts of India. I thought that it was a great time of engagement. I enjoyed watching the people from outside embracing the Aurovillian experience and at the same time the Aurovilians looking at that through these other cultures and communities. What is it to look at the community through this huge age range of 17 to 60 plus?

For the young people who grew up here it was a step forward out of their secondary education. One of the Aurovilians works in a school here and wants to use what was experienced in the EDE to inform his teaching. I remember him remarking, “What must it be like to see the Kaliveli tank area as an outsider?”

The EDE course had its curriculum with many different activities that we did, but community building and time for hearing each other and seeing what it is like to live together for 5 weeks is the real point of the EDE model. This brought everyone together for an intensive time. That was something that felt like Living Routes fast forward. We had 5 months with Living Routes and this was 5 weeks to deal with much of the same material. In a way that is why it was too full. But it had the feel of what is it to build community and live together.

Elvira, from the Tamara Community in Portugal, did conflict resolution and diversity. We visited farms and the Sustainable Living Institute. There were village projects: we experienced Tamil culture through kolams and dance. The economics unit started with the big picture in the world and then looked at what Auroville is doing to create a sustainable economy. The ecological aspect had restoration, reforestation, energy and alternative building through Sacred Groves, Auroville Earth Institute and the Bamboo Center. The group looked at social tools for governance, decision making and communication. The point of the curriculum is to get a taste of what is here.

The last week of integrated design gives practice in creating a project by dreaming what is possible. The Hive (Youth Link in Auroville) used this to move forward with their project. Another group created a game. This final step is for groups to work together, using everything they’ve seen, heard, and imagined. The presentations at Unity Pavilion demonstrated how the final work succeeded. There’s also Serena’s work to put everything in the video format.

See Ecovillage Design Education Auroville, a documentary by Serena Aurora on YouTube
The EDE curriculum is available at GAIA.org
The story for me begins with studying in a Dutch University and being outside of Auroville. There I discovered a new meaning for what community is: intentional community is something that is connected to a larger vision of the world which I found in both Auroville and the Eco village network. I wrote my thesis on this topic and when I came back to Auroville I found that people like Marti and Joss had been very much involved in this Eco Village network so I asked them for support for entrance into it. Joss had encouraged me to go to the next conference so we went together in 2015 to the Global Eco Village Network Summit which was also the 10th year anniversary of the Network and that is where I got to know many of the representatives. It was held in Findhorn, one of the older intentional communities (1962) of the world. People call Findhorn a sister community of Auroville. It was a huge discovery for me. Coming back to Auroville, Joss and I had found that there was a movement to bring youth to Eco Villages and we thought we should bring this to Auroville.

Bringing the Global Eco Villages Network (GEN) would allow more youth to experience what I had experienced. Thus we set up a GEN desk in Pitchandikulum to have a place for information and to see where that would take us. Once we started to let people know about the GEN desk then Nikki joined and then Ricardo volunteered and others gravitated toward us. We all felt it would be great to host an Ecovillage Design Education (EDE) course. Actually many members on the team were overlapping between Pitchandikulum and Youth Link. Most of us were young and wanted to continue this work with the ecovillage network and we needed to be certified to do that. So that was the start up of the EDE program. We felt that we were initiating ourselves into talking about what it was to design and organize Ecovillage communities. And hopefully to understand Auroville better through this experience because the format is experiential learning.

We set about designing under the mentorship of Joss on the Pitchandikulum campus, the site of the 2016 program. It was a privilege to design and implement the EDE. Our design was to make it accessible and affordable for the youth in Auroville who might not otherwise be able to join such an experiential program. We ran an experimental mini EDE in January 2016 as a 2 day experience. Within a week we were able to pull together a group of Auroville youth and test out the elements of the design we had developed. This gave us the confidence that we could conduct a 5 week course in 2017.

We advertised the EDE through GENOA, the Global Ecovillage Network for Asia and Oceana, our Auroville network and the Global Ecovillages network. We had so many people apply that we had to say no to many of them especially those who applied a day before the course began.

The GEN desk is in Pitchandikulum now. Nikki is working there. Our team comes together once a week. We have Riccardo who got a program accepted by the GEN youth network which encourages young people to move between communities of Ecovillages and to offer them accommodation and food so that they can experience these communities. Many people visit Auroville by connecting through the GEN desk. People from Sri Lanka, Orissa and Portugal were very happy to have a place like Pitchandikulum and the GEN desk to welcome them here. They appreciated being oriented to the land and a community upon their arrival here which is what Pitchandikulum does.

Our team consists of Youth Link and Pitchandikulum people. Pitchandikulum is constructing a GEN House or a Youth Link House... we’re not yet sure what to call it. It’s encouraging to have a space available to host people who come through the Ecovillage Network who want to offer Ecovillage and Community Building experiences. They have to have a place where they get support for those activities. We want to make that available here to people from all over the world.

The EDE is a good platform from which to design projects. We added an extra week for design. This was to support projects that would manifest in Auroville or other participant’s community. Our Auroville group has the Hive project through Youth Link. Another group in Auroville has the Joy project which is an impermanent housing project. The design week also gave space for people and projects that are now emerging for Sri Lanka. Through such design work we explored exporting things like Eco Femme products and other innovations that Aurovilians have developed.

KAVITHA: The story for me begins with studying in a Dutch University and being outside of Auroville. There I discovered a new meaning for what community is: intentional community is something that is connected to a larger vision of the world which I found in both Auroville and the Eco village network. I wrote my thesis on this topic and when I came back to Auroville I found that people like Marti and Joss had been very much involved in this Eco Village network so I asked them for support for entrance into it. Joss had encouraged me to go to the next conference so we went together in 2015 to the Global Eco Village Network Summit which was also the 10th year anniversary of the Network and that is where I got to know many of the representatives. It was held in Findhorn, one of the older intentional communities (1962) of the world. People call Findhorn a sister community of Auroville. It was a huge discovery for me. Coming back to Auroville, Joss and I had found that there was a movement to bring youth to Eco Villages and we thought we should bring this to Auroville.

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NIKKI: I first got introduced to the EDE through the mini program last year. All of us young people came into it with such strong dreams, but we needed a way to break them down so that our dreams could be manifested. I found that the strength of the EDE is the clarity we can develop through its set of skills which are not as straightforward as the usual education programs. You come out of it with a set of tools which can make these grand dreams happen. The 5 week EDE changed people.

The design week moved us into our next steps. We are working on building a relationship with the Ecovillage community in Sri Lanka. As our closest neighbor a collaborative relationship should be productive. We will focus on educational activities which are yet to be designed. We will start with what is relevant to the region and the community.

The Auroville GEN Desk and Youth Link will continue to encourage people to move into and experience communities. We will be a presence in Auroville so if anyone wants to visit, or create a new opportunity, or experience Auroville we can help facilitate that. We are looking for members to join our team from here or from outside. Our work is to update the GEN in Auroville, bring people here for events and experiences, and add our Auroville work to their GEN solutions. People from all over the world can know what is going on here and use what works for them.

Auroville’s 50th anniversary is coming. GEN Desk and Youth Link invite all the Auroville Youth to return for that celebration. We want the AVIs and all networks that exist to join a conference so that relationships can be strengthened.
AVI-USA Board Members
Visit Darkali
In February of this year six members of the AVI-USA board visited Darkali, the Auroville greenbelt community adjacent to and caretakers of the land delegated for the pavilion of the Americas. They were joined by several Aurovilians and visitors from Latin America, including longtime Auroville resident Anandi.

After tea and biscuits served by Agnes, Nevi and Gopal, the three veterans of Darkali, we watched a slide show of animals and birds who now frequent the small forest they have nurtured. This included shots taken at night with the wildlife camera donated to Darkali by AVI-USA. We then were led through the woods to the site of the Americas' pavilion as well as the renovated fitness trail which has become a popular place for Aurovilians.

Afterwards the AVI-USA members and spouses gathered at the home next to International House (IH) of B Sullivan and Nandini, named Trash Mahal since it is made from recycled materials.

During the meeting we discussed the situation at International House (formerly the American Pavilion guest house). Designed primarily as a residence for groups of students, IH charges among the lowest rates for guests in Auroville and is not able to fund needed renovations. B and Manu, the caretakers, have designed a unit of 4 cottages nearby that offer comfortable living at a higher rate in order to provide for the upkeep of IH and its continued service to young people.

This project may now be taken up by the full board of AVI-USA as a major initiative.

Anie Passes

Anne (Anie) Nunnally (12/18/36 - 4/26/17) passed away in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Nursing Home from kidney failure. She was 80 years old. Anie was a pioneer in Auroville and served at the Sri Aurobindo International Center, the Foundation for World Education and the Sri Aurobindo Center of Los Angeles. Friends plan to inter her ashes at Sacred Groves in Auroville next February. Her full obituary is in our latest eVolve newsletter which you can view online:

Matagiri

For the past few months, renovation of the cabin and sanctuary have been ongoing to preserve and upgrade the existing infrastructure at Matagiri Sri Aurobindo Center, outside of Woodstock, NY. Sam Spanier, the co-founder, often mused that he would like Aurovilians to volunteer to work on the property. This June facilities to house residents and guests of the Center will begin construction. The second floor will be a space for yoga, dance and Awareness Through the Body. Julian and Wendy Lines, trustees and stewards of Matagiri, are calling the new super insulated straw bale building "Auroville House". They hope to complete construction in time for Matagiri’s 50th and the All USA Meeting to be held nearby in August of 2018. Tax deductible donations are needed and welcome.
www.matagiri.org
CELEBRATING AUROVILLE’S 50TH BIRTHDAY

The essential spirit of Auroville shares much with the essential spirit of America. Both honor exploration and experimentation, unity within diversity, and the aspiration to harmonize individual freedom with the common good. International House has been a vessel in the International Zone where these two energies – America and Auroville – can mix and support each other. This has happened because of it being a welcoming home and connection point for Americans visiting and living in Auroville, especially long term youth visitors, such as Living Routes students. International House’s low-cost accommodations have made it possible for long term volunteers with limited financial means to land in Auroville, and the immediate connections with B Sullivan and other Americans have offered a cultural bridge for those new to the Auroville experiment.

International House is a project of the American Pavilion, and thus AVI-USA has a vested interest in its success. We also feel that now is the time, in celebration of Auroville’s 50th birthday, to infuse new life into this project that has been challenged since the end of the Living Routes Program.

It is also an auspicious opportunity to honor the lives of four visionary American Aurovilian women who dedicated their lives to furthering the joining of the American and Aurovilian streams. June Maher, Anie Nunnally, Bhavana Dee, and Juanita Cole each in their own unique way served the Mother’s vision of a place dedicated to the realization of a true human unity, and we feel that this project honors their work, their aspiration, and their love.

In that spirit, we propose to build four upscale guest cottages on the International House campus, and make some general overall improvements that will make it suitable for paying guests during the high season. The cottages will provide an ongoing sustainable source of income which will increase our capacity to draw and provide low cost housing for American youth with limited means. In a subtle way, each cottage will be dedicated to one of the women. There will be no ostentatious nameplates, but each cottage will be decorated with beautiful images, photographs, artwork, etc that carry the spirit and unique aspirations of the specific visionary woman that it honors.

Going forward, this project will do more than create and a welcoming place for Americans to land and experience Auroville. AVI-USA will work to leverage the capacity of International House by recruiting and supporting American Newcomers during their Newcomer year.

Today, youth with limited finances who are drawn by Mother’s call find it very difficult to live in Auroville, and even more difficult to survive a year as a Newcomer, where they are expected to work but do not receive a maintenance. Youth from North and South America travel further than anyone to reach Auroville, which in some ways makes their sacrifice even greater.

More than a donation, this project is an investment in the future of America’s relationship to Auroville. By providing International House with a reliable, steady stream of annual income from the guest houses, you will be supporting the project’s overall ability to attract, house, and support American youth who come to build Mother’s city. And you will be providing a solid foundation for growing AVI-USA’s program to increase the number of passionate and capable youth who can join the Auroville experiment. For 20 years the International House campus has welcomed short and long term volunteers and students from America, and thus they are powerfully capable of continuing and expanding in this role.

Give your tax-deductible donation via our website: www.aviusa.org or mail your check payable to AVIUSA or contact us for more information at (866 2 HELP AV 866-243-5728) or email us at info@aviusa.org.