

A Short History of All That Matters
Written in honor of our 15th Anniversary March 2010

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” Margaret Mead



In the summer of 1994, Joan Dwyer and Jeanne Wettlaufer – friends, neighbors, mothers in their mid-thirties – were both at a crossroads in their lives: Jeanne was an organic farmer with a herniated disk that kept her out of her fields and in her bed; and Joan, raising five children, was at a turning point herself. For both women, from the loam of personal challenge emerged the question, What do I want? The answer was “All That Matters.”

In March of 1995, the two impassioned friends opened the doors of a little yoga studio and holistic health center on Main Street in Wakefield. Fifteen years later, 1,000 people come weekly to ATM for yoga classes, self-development programs, certifications programs, a retail store, and therapeutic health services provided by physicians and therapists trained in Eastern and Western traditions. Today ATM is the stuff of Joan and Jeanne’s one-time dreams: it is the largest non-residential holistic center in New England.

This is the story of how two women’s big vision took root and blossomed in a South County community.

The Seed

In the 1990s Joan had to go “underground” in Rhode Island for everything she believed in – for diet, for spirituality, for good quality holistic medical care: “I had to travel to get to a homeopath. I had to go to someone’s living room to get a yoga class,” she remembers. “They don’t even have legal midwives in Rhode Island, and I began to feel a calling: it was time to get all this out from underground.”

“We knew the quality of a healer and the quality of a yoga teacher because we’d been to so many of them,” Jeanne says, “and during the summer that my back took me out of farming, we started to dream together of a holistic health center in Rhode Island.”

Imagining they would have other partners, Joan and Jeanne sponsored three well-attended community meetings for anybody interested in a holistic health center in South County. “Although no partners appeared, the community’s clear desire for an All That Matter confirmed our vision,” Joan says. “Both Jeanne and I lived a particular lifestyle. I had had home births; Jeanne was one of the founders of the New England Organic Farming Association and had an organic farm with CSAs; we eat macrobiotically; we believe in the philosophy that is aligned with Universal Principles; and we both brought up our children according to those values. People wanted to know the kinds of things we knew, and we wanted to bring the information and experiences to them.” Both the women and the community were lit up.

From Vision to Building

In the process of exploring possible locations for their seed of a project, the new business partners looked at a bookstore for sale. While they were in the building, Jeanne said, “We can’t have a yoga class in here.” And Joan asked, “Why are we having yoga classes in here? It’s a bookstore.” Suddenly they realized they had a bigger vision. When they got it all down on paper, their five pages of notes included All That Matters’ original mission statement (which still guides it today): to work together with a group of talented

people to educate and support each other and our community to continually grow and maintain optimal health and wellbeing. “We saw yoga, health services, and workshops. We saw food and maybe music in the evening. We saw a center that was community based and supporting of the arts,” Jeanne says.

When she found a Main Street building for sale at a steeply discounted price (the Department of Transportation had imminent plans to demolish and refurbish the street), Joan objected on two counts: “It’s an ugly building, and we don’t have any money.” Cerebral Joan could have *thought* about the project for a while, but Jeanne was adamant about needing a building in which to root the seeds of their dreams. Jeanne had long run a farm and her then-husband was a builder: “I was comfortable with real estate and creating spaces,” Jeanne says, “and Joan knew how to run an office, which I didn’t know anything about. Our talents were very different – which was helpful – and our vision was the same.”

The building required a deposit of \$10,000. “We didn’t have it,” Joan remembers, “and the next day we got a check for \$10,000 in our mailbox from a healer we both had worked with. The note said, ‘I was meditating and Archangel Michael told me that you needed a loan. I’m not sure what this is for. Here’s \$10,000’. We just screamed! Then we bravely put our homes down as collateral, and we bought the building.”

They raised enough money from friends and family to renovate the space. “We paid them interest annually, and then on a five-year note, we paid everyone back fully,” remembers Jeanne. “And from the start, magical stuff constantly happened.” For example, one day Jeanne was showing the space to an investor, explaining that eventually All That Matters would have the funds to fix two leaky skylights that were cemented over at the time. “My husband died on the shortest day of the year,” the investor said. “I would like to donate light. How much will the skylights cost?” She wrote a check right there, natural light floods in from above, and a little sign in the hallway honors her husband. “Consistently, people in the community were generously and personally invested in All That Matters,” Joan says.

Early Days

For the first four years, ATM had one yoga studio, an office, and another small room (the size of the current library) for classes, massage, and other therapies. Because the three spaces were connected, if a class was happening in the middle room, sometimes people had to go outside – in the rain, the dark, the ice – to get from the front room to the back room. The space was somewhat challenging, but the energy was flowing.

“We started out with six or eight yoga classes a week, one chi gong class, and one massage therapist,” Joan remembers, “and slowly we added a few more yoga classes and then programs like drumming and Reiki.”

“We had done research on how to start a center, and we used solid models,” she adds. “We incorporated elements about other centers that moved us – simple things like how well signs were posted all through Kripalu. We also were influenced by Omega. We aligned with people who we thought were doing what we wanted to do well, if on a much larger scale. We had a big vision, but didn’t have any idea we’d make it this big.”

From the beginning Jeanne’s mother, Dorothy Jewell Wettlaufer, was a mentor and enthusiastic supporter of the fledgling ATM. An artist and writer, she was “a very inspirational person,” Joan remembers. “When our catalog came out she would say, ‘When you’re ready, I want to sign up for everything.’ She would do tai chi and meditation and chi gong. She loved this place.” After she died, Jeanne donated her books to ATM, and the Jewell Reading Room was created in her honor.

A Family Business Grows

In the early days, Joan and Jeanne both lived on the same farm a mile from ATM, which was open six days a week. Each woman managed ATM for three days. “We didn’t work ten hour days,” Joan says (she does now), “we worked three or four hours. We were open in the morning, then we were open again in the evening. It was a family business. Jeanne and I are moms with eight kids between us, and we did it all – with the help of some volunteers. We’d have to come here and unlock the door for African drumming, then we had to stick around even if we didn’t want to do the African drumming, then we’d have to lock the door.”

“We put flyers everywhere, and ATM just kept getting bigger,” Jeanne remembers. This was back in the days before businesses routinely had computers, websites, and email. In fact, neither woman owned a computer when they opened their door for business. They borrowed one to make flyers – teaching themselves how to use it as they went. They sent out press releases, joined the Chamber of Commerce, and benefited from the “free” publicity of being on Main Street. Joan and Jeanne also gave free talks whenever anyone asked, a community outreach effort that evolved ATM’s current Speakers Bureau. Reiki Master Cheryl Ryan gave talks as well; she was supportive of ATM from the earliest community meetings and became one of the center’s first healers and teachers.

As attendance at yoga classes and other workshops swelled, ATM’s first yoga teacher Kendall Sheldon could no longer handle the weekly yoga schedule herself. (Today Kendall manages ATM’s retail store as well as teaching several yoga classes a week.) In 1995 it wasn’t easy to find yoga teachers in Rhode Island, so Joan posted a sign at Kripalu. Elizabeth Devereux responded and became ATM’s second yoga teacher, and for a while the core team was Joan, Jeanne, Cheryl, Kendall, and Elizabeth. “Then many people who started out as volunteers or yoga students at All That Matters went on to yoga teacher training at Kripalu, then came back and taught here,” Joan says. Several of those instructors are still teaching at the center today.

Computerizing its systems and creating a website were major leaps for ATM, which after four years of growth, in 1999 expanded physically into the space it occupies today (minus the store and one studio). Jeanne worked to design two studios and another classroom, three treatment rooms, two full bathrooms, and the front desk area. “That’s when Kendall started selling yoga mats out of a little room,” Jeanne remembers of the store’s closet-sized precursor.

“And that’s when we started hiring different sorts of therapists and doctors,” Joan adds. “It wasn’t until we built the three treatment rooms that we had the right space for health professionals and could start to develop that aspect of ATM.”

Personal Growth

Joan and Jeanne continued to develop and grow as ATM did. “We learned so much,” Joan says. “How to use a computer, how to public speak, how to write an ad, how to edit, how to deal with people who are mad at you, how much to charge people, how to invoice people.”

“Joan did all the interviewing and wrote the catalog,” Jeanne remembers. “I sold the ads, and I usually managed the space here because Joan worked from home for the first eight years.” In those days, Jeanne did ATM’s budgeting and accounting. She would show Joan numbers on large green sheets of accounting paper (pre-bookkeeping software) and Joan would say, “I don’t know what you’re showing me!” She has since mastered the material: today Joan manages ATM’s ever-growing budget, teaches “the business of

yoga” at Kripalu and elsewhere, and advises yoga and health centers. She likens her years at ATM to earning the graduate degree in business that she didn’t have at the start.

“When new ways of doing business became widespread – websites and computerized accounting among them – we taught ourselves or we got advice from people who knew better,” Joan says. “To this day I’m still good at that. When I hit a wall, I bring in an expert to show me a better way to do something.”

Establishing and nurturing ATM was “like a forced intensive in personal growth,” Joan says. “In the beginning Jeanne and I went to almost all the workshops and events. We had to test them out to see if we could stand behind them. Little did we know some of what we were getting into. We became Reiki I certified, we were getting massages, we went to shamanic workshops, we were also avid yoga students...One of the things that stands out for me is how much personal work it triggered for us to be establishing a holistic health center. I remember thinking we were good at it because we were growing so much ourselves. You can’t be a beacon for growth and just be sitting there.”

Next Steps

In January 2003, ATM expanded to its present size, including today’s award-winning yoga-products store and a third yoga studio. The following year Jeanne returned to farming and became a silent partner at ATM; then in 2005 Joan, her husband David, and Jeanne sold the building that still houses ATM, and Joan became the 100% owner and director of the center. (Jeanne now lives right around the corner and walks to class whenever she wants a dose of ATM.)

Since that time, ATM’s core yoga staff has grown from half a dozen to 21 talented and dedicated instructors, some of whom teach around the world and are internationally respected; the roster of ATM workshops has grown large enough to require a 30-page catalog and a program director; and ATM has added depth to its health services team, with an acupuncturist, a chiropractor, and other practitioners. ATM’s Speakers Bureau has also grown. Businesses and other groups – such as bridal showers – might come to the center for a retreat or event. ATM can create a whole program for a group, including meals, massage, classes, and presentations. The Speakers Bureau also sends speakers and teachers to outside programs. “For example, just the other day the Providence School Department called about a meeting of their occupational therapists,” Joan says. “They wanted a class on doing yoga with children, so we sent a speaker to their program.”

Because group experiences can be so powerful, in late 2006 ATM began offering a “40-Day Program” based on Baron Baptiste’s book *40 Days to Personal Revolution*. Several times a year now Joan and her husband David lead this popular program in which students do the healing work of eating well, meditating, and doing yoga in community. “It brings all of what ATM offers into one program,” Joan says of this transformative program rooted in the lifestyle she and David believe in.

Celebrating Fifteen Years of Service and Evolution

Coming upon fifteen years at ATM, Joan reflects on the organic nature of the adventure: “Jeanne and I were leading from our heart all through this process – and that was before managing from the heart became trendy.”

Their “leading from the heart” was catalytic for the whole community and ultimately affected the trajectory of the town of Wakefield, which was somewhat rundown in the mid-90s many vacant buildings and struggling stores. When ATM opened its doors, Joan and Jeanne were very involved in encouraging the growth of downtown Main Street. Jeanne sat on the economic development committee, the zoning board, the Main Street committee, and the Downtown Friends of Wakefield board. She started

Wakefield's town fair and its block party. With ATM anchoring Main Street, the town really woke up. In fact, when Joan was recently considering the possibility of moving ATM to another building, one local business owner told her that if ATM moved, half the stores on Main Street would close because all of their customers have yoga mats on their back.

“Even more exciting was that people would tell us they moved to the area because they saw ATM and knew there were like-minded people in this community. That continues to be a great feeling for me,” Joan says. “We’re very proud to contribute to the town. It’s a big piece of what Jeanne and I value about what we’ve done. All the healing and magic that goes on in the building has spilled out into the community.”

Looking Forward

This element of community and the “larger world” is at the foundation of ATM’s perspective on its future. What excites Joan – and all the people connected to ATM – is helping make the world a healthier place, one person and one community at a time. She’s always saying inner peace leads to world peace, and that’s all that matters.

“The practices that serve to center and relax us individually, can – and must at this particular time in human and our history – serve the whole grand enterprise of life on earth,” Joan says. “As Pema Choödrön puts it in her latest book, *Taking the Leap*: ‘The main question is, are we living in a way that adds further aggression and self-centeredness to the mix, or are we adding some much-needed sanity?’ Nurturing ourselves and adding sanity to the mix is our commitment as we go forward for the next 15 years and beyond.”

Written by Jane Bernstein November 09