

Joy Fox

One woman, many lives

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NWA DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE





NWA Democrat-Gazette/ANDY SHUPE

“HITCHHIKING IS A KIND OF A PROFOUND RELIGION, actually. Having that kind of faith in the universe always met us back there with grace,” Fox says of her days traveling the world by hitching rides.

Driving out to Wattle Hollow, the Winslow retreat and meditation center created by Joy Fox, feels a little bit dangerous. The first part of the journey is straightforward: Take the West Fork exit off of I-49 and head toward Devil’s Den. When you see a small, hand-painted “WH” sign on the side of

about three-and-a-half miles before you hit Devil’s Den, hang a left — and buckle in. The last mile or so is a steep gravel road, cut into the side of a mountain, that gets progressively more narrow as the drop-off — a hundred feet or more — creeps ever closer to your car. Homemade signs that read “10 m.p.h.” line the route, but they’re hardly necessary: Only someone with a death wish would try to go faster around the tight turns and over the steep hills. By the time you pull up in front of the main house of Wattle Hollow, you feel as though you’ve earned the sudden, startling quiet that greets you when you exit your car — it feels 1,000 miles from anywhere, instead of a mere 30 miles outside a bustling college town.

The buildings of Wattle Hollow dot this part of the forest, and to describe them as “whimsical” would be an understatement: With their peaked roofs and turrets, they resemble a fairy neighborhood. Fox has spent the last 40 years building the campus in fits and starts, first with her husband Merlin, later by herself and with the help of friends after he died.

“I’m not really an artist, but I take the step in that direction, because I feel that it’s time to make something,” says Fox. Yet all the buildings at Wattle Hollow — even the huts that house the compost toilets — are bursting with

creativity that belies that statement. Using tile, stained glass and bits of china and crockery, Fox has created a world that delights the eye, wherever it lands.

“She’s given quite a beautiful gift to our community by creating Wattle Hollow.”

— Leslie Oelsner

“When a beloved young family member unexpectedly left his body, I was in grief and needed a place to heal for a few months,” says friend Stephen Coger. Fox offered Wattle Hollow as a sanctuary. “The mixed media sugar monster next to her refrigerator, the turtle mosaic on her kitchen floor, the calming paintings on her wall and inside her cupboard — all of it gave me the nourishment I needed. A sort of nourishment of space. And that’s what Wattle Hollow is. A nourishing space that makes it safe to explore our own minds, to witness the 10,000 monkeys of our thoughts.

“The first time I visited Wattle, I told Joy that never had such a place given me permission to be so truly myself,” Coger continues. “The fish of sea world, swimming at once inside and outside the wall — something about that building is very special for me.”

WHAT IS WATTLE?

Wattle Hollow is an enormously successful retreat center, hosting sold-out events like the upcoming four-day silent meditation intensive retreat, an afternoon of Kundalini yoga and a Songwriter’s Creativity fall retreat featuring popular musical artists Still on the Hill. (That one still has a few spots available.)

Fox greets newcomers to the center warmly: She’s a hugger, but she asks, politely, beforehand. She sits for an interview on the back deck of the main retreat house, which overlooks a placid pond. The setting itself is calming, never mind any meditation that might take place. Butterflies dance around Fox’s halo of dark curls, and she laughs, noting that it’s not uncommon. Whether she is leading a group or meditating on her own, animals frequently gather near her, she says. Were it anyone else telling this story, you might be tempted to dismiss it. But with the nearby butterflies, squirrels and frogs — not to mention the variety of birds that seem to perfectly punctuate Fox’s stories with their calls — it is not difficult to believe that the woman sitting in front of you somehow summons nature with her voice.

In this setting, Fox is a long way from her beginnings in staid, suburban Chevy Chase, Md., just outside the nation’s capital. She has had a huge life, one that has spanned continents, spanned careers and spanned human connections. As she tells it, Fox has never stopped learning the lessons life has wanted to teach her, not even for a second.

“My father was a lawyer,” says Fox. “It was a very ‘Donna Reed Show’ [childhood]. [My father] would come home at 6:24 and turn on the radio and the TV and pick up the newspaper every night, with precision. And he wasn’t available. We were very typical, American, starved suburban children.”

Fox was the youngest of three, a dark-haired girl with unruly curls. Her mother wrestled her own curls into a smooth blonde wave every morning, but Fox says she never stood a chance of fitting in the same way.

“My mother would cringe to look at me,” says Fox without rancor. “She had blonde hair and blue eyes. She really didn’t want dark children. She would either buy me wigs or straighteners or plaster my hair with the lanolin so it would behave. She liked something to behave.”

Her mother did, however, recognize that there must be a cause behind Fox’s struggles in school, and she had her tested for dyslexia.

“I went to see this woman who was not only loving, which didn’t happen at my house, but who also helped me learn to read,” says Fox. “It was quite a blessing from my mother. Mrs. Angel was the woman’s name — how appropriate. She had beautiful white hair, and she gave me so much more than [literacy].”

As someone who counted the feeling of being out of place among her first memories, Fox knew, early on, that she must belong somewhere else.

“I remember as a teenager in Chevy Chase, just scanning the horizon saying, ‘Please, God, let there be more, please let there be more than this,’” she says.

SEE THE WORLD

She first found “more” when she attended her father’s alma mater, the University of Wisconsin in Madison. But if her father thought his previously sedate college campus would be a calming influence on his restless daughter, he was soon disabused of that notion. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, the university had become a hotbed of student activism. Fox wasted no time in bringing what she was learning home to Chevy Chase.

“My first year, I had these fabulous radical teachers,” she says. “I came home trying to tell [my parents] about what America had done to Honduras and Egypt, and I had all these facts. After 15 minutes of telling the factual, liberal gospel to my parents, my mom turned to my dad and said: ‘The Communists have got her.’”

“My brother was winning prizes and doing the Ph.D., medical thing, and my sister was always a good girl.” Fox pauses to laugh. “My brother considered me a threat to the family. He said, ‘You might be infecting mother.’”

But what she had found in Madison wasn’t enough to hold her attention. Fox wanted to travel to the places she was learning about on campus, and the constant protests — culminating in a heartbreaking loss when Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated — had left her feeling disillusioned. She tried studying for a summer semester in Santa Barbara, Calif., but classroom learning had entirely lost its appeal. She soon dropped out of school and started decades of travels — sometimes with a companion, sometimes solo — where she gathered all the information and life lessons that she would later pour into Wattle Hollow.

“Joy was, in many ways, the black sheep of the family,” says niece Karen Kefauver. “But she was so exotic and well-traveled, she was intriguing to me and other members of our family. I would say that, in many ways, she’s kind of the guru or therapist of many family members who have confided in her. She’s always had a special role.”

Fox had a knack for finding companions with “good energy” who shared her yearning for travel and adventure and her disdain for material possessions — first, a motorcyclist named Johnny with whom she hitchhiked around Mexico and South America, and later, Merlin, with whom she explored India and discovered Vipassana meditation. But Fox was courageous enough to travel on her own, too. In between meeting those two companions, she explored America, becoming a migratory fruit picker to earn a living. It was during these years she met Merlin while she was in Missoula, Mont., participating in a “Rainbow Gathering,” a large, peaceful get-together held once a year for groups of people who were usually considered in the counterculture.

“I was helping someone carry their teepee down a mountain, and I just dropped everything, and I went to greet that man,” she says. “I just saw something. It wasn’t romantic. It was just ... wow. Six months later, I got a postcard, and I didn’t know it was him because I didn’t remember his name. But it was a beautiful postcard. He said, ‘Do you want to get together?’ And I wrote back, and I said, ‘Could you send me a photo?’ It was a lovely card, but I didn’t know if it was enough to base a life decision on.”

The photo revealed the writer to be the man to which she had felt that instant connection. Merlin, who was an engineer originally from the United Kingdom, proposed the two meet up in person immediately. Fox, who had let fate lead her life to that point, pointed out that the two had similar plans — they both intended to hitchhike down the Baja

Peninsula that winter.

“I wrote him, and I said, ‘Since our paths are running along parallel lines, I’ll probably run into you there.’ He telegrammed back: ‘Parallel lines never meet. I’ll meet you in Missoula,’ and he took a bus to meet me.”

The spiritual teachings of Indian teachers and gurus led the couple to explore that continent. One of Fox’s breakthroughs during her time there was her exposure to S.N. Goenka, a teacher of Vipassana meditation.

“He was the most fiery teacher you could imagine,” says Fox. “People would say, ‘How do you sit?’, and he would answer with one word: ‘Lotus.’ As she says the word, Fox drops her voice an octave and speaks with a rich Indian accent. “That meant ‘Full Lotus’. I got to hear all of these Westerners coming up, not used to this, and they would say, ‘Yeah, my knee is killing me.’ He would say, ‘Yes, please continue.’ And they would think he hadn’t understood them. ‘My knee is killing me.’ ‘How wonderful that you are feeling something.’

“Wow. What a great blessing. I learned to witness pain from the inside and not take it personally. Perhaps the greatest gift of my life, how to depersonalize pain.”

HOME SWEET HOME

Eventually, Fox and Merlin returned stateside but decided it was time to put some roots down. They were drawn to the back-to-the-land — or homestead — movement that they had read about in the periodical

Mother Earth News.

“There was always an ad from Berryville, Ark.,” says Fox. “I’d never been to Arkansas. The ad said, ‘Consider us the Garden of Eden with ticks and chiggers!’ Now I tell people, these ticks and chiggers are like a tourist prophylactic — otherwise there would be nothing but condominiums here. How many people have said, ‘I’m moving here,’ and then run screaming because of the ticks and chiggers? So I give thanks to the ticks and chiggers.”

They eventually found a perfect plot of land just outside of Fayetteville.

“We sat here,” she says, motioning toward the pond. “It was mostly brambles, and it had nothing on our list. No south-facing front, no creek running through the middle. We were hiking, and I said, ‘Who are we kidding? We’re home.’ And Merlin said, ‘Yes, I know.’

“And here’s maybe the most important part of my life: I walked back and forth on the pond bank the first day, and I was thinking, ‘My parents are going to be so proud of me. Someday, they’re going to come here, and they’re going to see what I’ve done.’ And that went on about an hour, and then the spirit said, ‘Your parents are never going to be proud of you. They’re devoted to their suburban life. You’d better do this for yourself.’ And maybe that’s the most important instructions ever. How many people live their lives according to their own intuition, not trying to please their parents? Such a gift, that I gave up ever making my parents proud.”

The couple settled in, making a life in Winslow and building a home (though they didn’t have electricity for the first six years Fox owned the property). Despite the fact that they were outsiders and fit the profile of that “H” word — hippies — they had no trouble fitting into the community.

“We started consulting the elders and, you know, their children didn’t care [about traditions],” Fox remembers. “Their children were trying to get the new Chevy, get ahead. We cared about, ‘How do you work this wood stove?’

“The most beautiful story I can tell you is: We went to an auction, and auctions were big deals back then. We put in a bid on this amazing box stove. There were a hundred people there, and no one would bid against us, so we got it for around \$25. People told me, ‘Well, I was going to go for it, and then I saw you were bidding on it.’ We were very sincere, very sober, coming from a spiritual realm, and we had everything to learn. They were delighted to have

somebody that wanted to listen.”

This happy, peaceful life was brought to a sad halt when Merlin was diagnosed with cancer. He had surgery, and then Fox cared for him, utilizing every alternative therapy method she could find in her research. Fox was no stranger to death: In fact, she says, she considers her “cosmic assignment” to sing to people as they are dying. Starting at the age of 15, when she lost a young friend to a heart condition, Fox would experience deaths of those close to her at a higher rate than normal. She says she grew to accept that it was just part of her role in life and spent years volunteering with hospice in Northwest Arkansas, before eventually becoming a bereavement coordinator.

“Long before it became a popular concept, I’ve been ‘midwifing’ people off the planet,” she says with a gentle smile. “[I’ve sung] to many people while they’re dying, if the person asks or I’m given permission. I’ve done that many, many times in and out of hospice, just because I just happened to be there. And I sang to Merlin as he was leaving.”

BACK TO BUILDING

Fox’s life took a detour at this point — she remarried, got a counseling degree, divorced — but seven years later, she turned her efforts back to making what she knew, in her heart, Wattle Hollow could be. Using methods she had learned along her journeys like cob and mud building, she slowly built the Wattle Hollow campus, which has become a very successful retreat destination over the years.

But Fox also contributes to her community and the world at large in so many other ways — such as the aforementioned bereavement counseling, work with the incarcerated and as a climate change educator — that it seems as if she’s found a way to fold the space-time continuum.

“One of the things that might surprise people about Joy, because she doesn’t speak in public about it or advertise it, but she has such a heart for the downtrodden,” says Fox’s friend, Beth Coger. “She travels to Third World countries every year to do service work, sometimes more than once, and most recently Thailand. She works in orphanages, helps with food gathering, sometimes staying in a Buddhist retreat center and in villages. She is an amazing teacher.”

“She’s given quite a beautiful gift to our community by creating Wattle Hollow,” says friend Leslie Oelsner. “There’s nowhere else like it around here, and I’m one of many — of all ages — who have benefited immensely from meditation retreats, dance, yoga, and many other offerings at Wattle. The combination of her unique creativity and deep spirituality, and the beauty of nature there, has given rise to a wonderful and magical place.”

A magical place that continues to inspire the next generation, as Fox says Wattle Hollow attracts a surprising number of millennials.

“I think that kids have a sonar for the bullsh*t, and they know I’m not bullsh*t-ting,” she says with a laugh. “They know that my words come from the moment.”

But the attendees aren’t the only ones who learn from Wattle Hollow events. Whether she sits at the front or back of the room or in middle of the crowd, Fox takes it all in — learning, always learning.

“I’m 72, and probably have 30 years [to go] at the outside,” she muses. “I think I’m going to live awhile. Or not. But that will be gone in a geological blink, and I don’t want to waste one second.

“Every experience has either helped me expand or helped me witness someone’s pain, which is what I want to be here for.”

THROUGH OTHERS’ EYES

JOY FOX

• “My first impression of Joy was that her name fit her perfectly. She radiated joy and calmness then, and she still does. Every time I see her, I am envious of her calm and thoughtful spirit.”

— Beth Coger

• “Joy often does the work of several different people at retreats — cooking, teaching yoga and meditation, being the caring hostess and groundskeeper for guests, etc. Her adventurous nature and her heartfelt service never cease to amaze me.”

— Leslie Oelsner

• “Joy is a fantastic friend for reminders. I run a nonprofit for immigrants and refugees, and there is so much that can happen, good stuff, but also a lot of painful, frustrating or sad things. Joy is always available to remind me that I honestly have no clue what is in anyone’s highest interest. I get to do my best and then whatever circumstances arise and fall thereafter are each person’s responsibility to encounter and — hopefully — grow from.”

— Stephen Coger

• “Joy has a killer sense of humor — we laugh and laugh. I love that about her. I also want to say that when she calls me up, she always says, ‘Hello to my brilliant, shining niece,’ and I love her calling me that. Inherently, she is kind and open-hearted. Growing up, Joy was the exotic one [in the family]; she kind of looked like a hippy — she had big, curly hair, and my grandmother was always trying to shoehorn her into a certain set of East Coast etiquette, but that never worked. I feel lucky to have an aunt like Joy, and she’s absolutely shaped many facets of my life.”

— Karen Kefauver

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Next:

Larry Wilson

Little Rock