



# La Casa de Maria - A Place Apart

by Nancy Gross



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After visiting a good friend in Culver City, and attending a Sunday morning Buddhist meditation at the Bodhi Tree, I looked into meditation close to home. I live in Ojai, and knew I wanted something for a beginner that was not rigidly dogmatic. Meditation Mount was plentiful with meditation offerings, but none of these fit my schedule at the time.

I was working at a boutique hotel in Santa Barbara, a combination of day and evening shifts, and I was constantly driving, or catching up on rest at home. I saw an ad in the Santa Barbara Independent for free weekly Mindfulness Medita-

tion, Tuesday and Thursday evenings in Montecito. This would work after a day shift, and not get me home too late. What I didn't know, until I first drove to the location, was how generous this option was. The advertisement should have mentioned that the meditations are held on a piece of property so infused with paradise, my heart started glowing as soon as I arrived.

La Casa de Maria, a serene and inviting retreat sanctuary near Santa Barbara, is a place that seems to understand change; constructive and often gentle, change. The many programs

offered by La Casa, or brought there by outside organizations, address real life struggles with addiction, with recovering from trauma, and with building bridges of communication among groups. Slowing down and taking stock of emotions facilitates these efforts; the spirit strengthens alongside the mind and body, going right into the heart for healing and growth. The sun-dappled, tree-canopied nooks and pathways at La Casa de Maria cradle people through their transformations.

Peggy Haskell, who works in registration at La Casa, describes her joy at being part of the retreat center staff. Peggy gave

up a more lucrative position at Pacifica Graduate Institute when La Casa sold another nearby landholding to the school. She prefers the spiritual center, "because of all the angels. When I drive in there, my car slows down, the pace of my heart slows down. I just feel this total contentment and feel that this is where God had placed me."

I met Peggy when I visited the main office after my first Tuesday meditation. On a darkening Spring evening, I was like a moth, drawn to the light through the office door. The entrance was flanked with racks of citrus from La Casa's orchards, and

small brown bags to pack the fruit in. I had to know more about this place. I had seen Peggy before; we'd met at a gathering for Santa Barbara hospitality industry staff about a month prior. She also works at The Simpson House, a historic Victorian landmark, and AAA's only five-diamond designated bed and breakfast in the country.

As I got to know Peggy, she opened her home to me for several days so that I could see what it might be like to move to Santa Barbara. I'll never forget waking up that first morning; Peggy had remembered what time I had to be to work. She had

coffee ready for me in a porcelain cup painted with roses. The tray also contained cream and sugar, and she opened up the sliding glass door to her balcony and encouraged me to have my breakfast with Santa Barbara stretching below me out to the many sailboats on the blue and gold Pacific. As we talked and got acquainted, Peggy shared some of her own journey:

"My husband was a pilot for 21 years with Flying Tigers, which became Fed Ex. He died in a plane crash in 1989. I had a dream his plane was going to crash. I told him not to go on that trip. I'd known him since I was eight years old. He was the love of my life. I still wear his ring, I drank to deal with the pain, but now I'm 18 years sober." Her son kept urging her to get out and work: "He told me, 'You like to cook. You like to take care of people. See if you can get a job at a bed and breakfast.'"

Peggy persisted in knocking on the door of the Old Yacht Club B & B, even bringing homemade cookies over to them, until they conceded to create a position for her. She also learned how to give massages. It is a sight to see this very pretty, petite woman, who is also a grandmother, stuffing a large cushioned case containing a massage table into her small white sports car, and then, full of enthusiasm and energy, taking off;

"Every place I go, it seems like a divine plan, and I just follow it, and I keep getting happier and happier. When I was

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*(La Casa continued from page 7)*

working at Friendship Manor, a senior community, I called to see if there was anything open at La Casa. I really like the philosophy, the spiritual. I think I need it. Both places I work now, I feel uplifted. There are some good AA meetings held on the grounds at La Casa.”

We spoke together at Peggy’s house recently for this article. The lights of Santa Barbara, framed by her big picture window, looked like an array of holiday lights against a scenic backdrop. Her landscape and décor includes a table made from a tree stump and angels and Buddhas; she had a fire going. While her white curly-haired dog, Dakota, played at my feet, she told me about the 10th Anniversary of the Ministry of All Women conference at La Casa to be held in May. According to Peggy, the yearly three-day event calls upon the abilities of women to mend and weave, to explore relationships with self, nature and each other. It is a time to learn and to celebrate the feminine gifts to the world through the work women do with love and compassion. It includes ritual, presentations, circle dialogue, artistic expression and quiet reflective time. Women from diverse backgrounds find common ground while on this sacred and beautiful property.

**P**eggy also introduced me to Associate Director Juliet Spohn Twomey, who also put me in touch with Carol Carrig, a Sister at the Immaculate Heart Center, which houses an integral segment of La Casa de Maria, The Immaculate Heart Community. The two filled me in on the history, changes to the place, and the communities served.



*Within the spiritual sanctuary of La Casa de Maria, there are a variety of ways to reconnect to soul and Spirit. La Casa’s main chapel offers space for personal and communal prayer, ritual and meditation. The rustic stone Labyrinth is a chapel in nature with a canopy of Oak trees to shelter those whose prayer and meditation takes on the form of mindful walking.*

“Way, way back,” Juliet informed me, “we know that the Chumash Indians lived here. We have a particular form of Oak tree that dates back before the conquistadores,” and acorns were a staple in the Chumash diet. “We think this was a little bit of a way station, and in the 1800s it was part of a land grant.” This grant included neighboring San Ysidro Ranch. Part of the citrus orchard created at that time is still cultivated by La Casa de Maria. The land also went through a few secular owners, including an oilman and a Wall Street investor. They lived, ranched, threw parties, and, in one case, raised thoroughbred horses there, before it became part of a religious community.

“The creek has these huge, incredible boulders that come down from the mountains,” Juliet explained. “The stone house was quarried, cut and finished using these stones.” A stone house that was built as a mansion found its full flowering as a place of prayer and a seeker’s retreat. The sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (IHM), a Roman Catholic Order of Religious, purchased the estate and the stone house to be their novitiate in the 1940s. The Immaculate Heart Community (IHC) broke away from the IHM and Catholicism in the 1960s and 70s, and

established themselves on this property.

Immaculate Heart Center director, Carol Carrig, who is retiring after over 60 years with La Casa de Maria, had this to share;

“I’m going to be 77. I came here as a 17-year-old, on September 15, 1949, out of high school. I was a postulant, then a novice. We wore black dresses in those days and spent nine months as a postulant in a white veil, then one year as a novice. I then went out to teach 51 first graders at age 19. In those days we would not admit it, but I did not feel prepared. We were in habit, and that helped. I did it all. Then we went through all the changes in the 60s. It was a really wonderful time. Some important things came from the Vatican Council. We had some choice of what we would do. I felt I’d done everything I could at that school and I asked for a more contemplative monastery assignment, but I was advised to apply to UCSB for Religious Studies. That was very life changing and transformational. I had for my professor and mentor, Walter Capps, the deceased husband of Congresswoman Lois Capps, and studied process philosophy and theology.

Juliet elaborated on the dramatic changes that had occurred during the 60’s:

“Vatican Council — Vatican II — asked the religious to rethink what it means to be religious in the modern world. The IHM community took this very seriously and invited many scholars to talk to them. They made some really big changes, and of 350 women, 50 stayed with IHM, and 300 became ecumenical and left.”

The women who left were able to purchase the Montecito novitiate for their home, and the ecumenical designation meant they could open their umbrella to cover a broader Christian community. They became the IHC, or just the Community. They had already been offering retreats to Catholic married couples, and began to open the retreat center to people of other Christian denominations, and eventually any denomination, or none. Juliet said: “As California changed, we became interfaith.”

After getting her masters degree, Carol taught religion and worked in administration at several graduate schools. She also went to Uganda as a missionary.

“I worked with women setting up cooperatives.” The mission focused on aiding the women in dealing with the pressures of the way the world was changing. “We would teach them to sew and to work together to sell their work and earn money, to make them self-sustaining.” Her most recent post came about when Immaculate Heart Center’s director, Noreen Naughton, left in the summer of 1997: “I had the training in spiritual direction, working with adults. I felt really drawn to this ministry, adults interested in the spiritual life.” Carol says that spiritual direction is only offered when asked for, and usually amounts to listening and companionship.

“We are open to everyone. If they are drawn to come on a retreat, we ask that they be coming on a retreat and not a vacation. That is what is so beautiful, that we’re able to provide the place where they can then find the deepest place in themselves. For some people the dinner hour is important, while others retain their privacy. It is amazing how people minister to each other. I think what keeps us all going is knowing this is such an important experience for the people who come. Some return again and again. They need this to keep them in a centered place.”

Large retreat groups, many brought from outside organizations, and individuals find sustenance for the inward journey at La Casa de Maria and the Immaculate Heart Center.

The day I visited began crisp and sunny, then turned cloudy and colder. Carol remarked, “Isn’t it interesting how this day has changed? It takes you from outward to inward.”

She made me some tea, uncovered a plate of homemade cookies, and introduced me to one more contented person, Teresa Fanucchi, the Immaculate Heart Center chef.

“This is a really special place for me,” Teresa told me. “I really do love having a connection to the people I cook for. In my career, I keep returning to cooking for people on retreat. There is something about supporting them in that. They seem to be very present for the food, and appreciative of the organic garden we get our produce from, and the orchard.”

Teresa said that day, rather than cook from memory, she was cooking directly from La Casa and IHC’s newly released cookbook, *A Place at the Table*. With beautiful photographs, and artwork by internationally known serigrapher, Sister Mary Corita Kent, the cookbook can allow some of the nourishment and peace of a retreat to be brought into one’s home. Sales of the cookbook benefit the IHC Community.

I come across one of Corita’s serigraphs on an IHC brochure. It announces, “We can only speak of hope.”

That is the sense I get on the grounds of La Casa de Maria, in the stone house at its center, where the Immaculate Heart Community resides, and in the demeanor of everyone I meet who has been touched by the serene and sympathetic heart in this spiritual corner of lush Montecito. As I conclude some interviews just before evening falls, I’m inclined to walk around. I look up at immense trees, and wind slowly through a stone labyrinth made from more rocks from the creek. I can turn in every direction in wonder; I feel embraced in peace, cared for like a child, and peace is worth so much in these times. It gets into my heart and, when I rest in it, it changes me little by little.

Visit [lacasademaria.org](http://lacasademaria.org), and [immaculate-heartcenter.org](http://immaculate-heartcenter.org)

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# La Casa de Maria



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