

## Crystal Spring Preserved in Time

The Crystal Spring Center for Earth Learning rests on 42 acres of former farm and orchard land in the rapidly developing town of Plainville. A small group of Dominican Sisters have cared for the land since 1949, when the Toner Family bestowed it upon them in gratitude for caring for their handicapped daughter during her lifetime. At the time, Sister Bernardine Sullivan described touring the grounds: “The property is all country but is directly off route 1. Orchards are everywhere—over 750 fruit trees. Plants and flowers of all descriptions... The main house, cottage, garage, grotto, rock garden and orchards are on one side of the road and the apple barn, silo, horse stables, sheds and huge truck farm are on the other.” The Toners, for whom the land had great sentimental value, hoped it would be kept in tact and used as a place of learning.



Standing in the open meadow almost 60 years later, the land presents a different scene. The orchards and truck farm are long gone. Open fields and woodland mark the spot. The barns and sheds have disappeared, but the rock garden is in bloom. A portion of the original acreage has been sold, but a 42 acre parcel remains. Over the years, the site has hosted many vital educational programs, culminating in the Crystal Spring Center for Earth Learning established in 1992. The Center was born of the resident

Sisters recognizing the relentless diminishment of the natural world, the depletion and destruction of the primary elements that sustain all living matter; of “hearing the ever-deepening cry and silent surrender of so many disappearing species.” Inspired by the “New Story<sup>1</sup>” the Sisters sought ways to pursue the “Great Work<sup>2</sup>” of our time, of relearning what it means for the human community to live in harmony with the natural world.

In recent years, as the Dominican Order has declined in numbers and congregations consolidate, the Sisters had become concerned about the future of this land. Neighboring farm land and open space had been converted to house lots. A seven acre pine grove 1/8<sup>th</sup> mile away had been cleared for yet another commercial development. The road running past this development, still registered as rural, is busy with traffic traveling to the outlet malls at the other end. To live in this place is to have witnessed many losses.

The Sisters sought a future for the land that would uphold their vision. In their own words, “In the past fifteen years our educational program has evolved into an inquiry into the systemic roots of our human ecological crisis and the search for viable alternatives. In order for the abundance of the Toner gift and the Dominican mission to unfold into the future, we seek the way to demonstrate both our regard for and our commitment to life and to the web of relationships that we call the land; and to protect the land that was so generously given into our trust.”

With assistance from local ecologists the Sisters identified the property's conservation value. They found:

- The property contains valuable natural wildlife habitats, including a mixed white pine-oak forest.
- Protecting their land, which abuts existing Town conservation land, would create an expanded area of conserved open space for wildlife habitat and recreation.
- The property lies in an area considered of the highest priority for biodiversity protection in the state. This area is designated as "Priority Habitat" by the State of Massachusetts Natural Heritage and Endangered Species BioMap Project.

The Crystal Spring Sisters then began the work of documenting the land's values and boundaries, of crafting a vision for its future. The Wildlands Trust, a local *land trust* able to work with landowners to conserve land, began to draft a *conservation restriction* to reflect the Sisters' vision. They sought to protect the recovering woodland that now covers much of the



property while maintaining some agricultural potential for a portion of the land. The Sisters determined to seek no recompense for giving up the monetary value of the right to develop the land, and raised funds to provide an endowment for the perpetual stewardship of the property. A presentation to their governing body, the Dominican Sisters of St. Catharine, Kentucky, in 2007 told the story of the land and its value, and gathered the approval needed to finalize the preservation. In March of 2008, the conservation restriction was signed and approved, protecting this small part of God's creation forever.

Crystal Spring will continue to be a vital resource for the neighboring community, to meet the needs of the times and to be a critical part of the recovery of land and spirit in southeastern Massachusetts. The Sisters will continue their work on the now-conserved Crystal Spring property, striving to share their experience of Earth as the primary revelation of the divine.

***We live with...  
reverence for the mystery of being,  
gratitude for the gift of life,  
a humility for our human place  
in nature and the whole.***  
- Earth Charter

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<sup>1</sup> Eco-theologian Thomas Berry calls for a "New Story" or mythic consciousness to reunite humans with the creative energy of the universe and overcome our destructive spiritual estrangement from the source of life.

<sup>2</sup> The "Great Work" of our time is to establish a mutually enhancing human-earth relationship in all our endeavors and institutions. (Thomas Berry's seminal work, *Dream of the Earth*, 1988.)

See Glossary for definitions of land trust and conservation restriction.