

SINGER'S VISION REVIVED IN THE HEART OF THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS

by Debbie King (2001)

When singer/songwriter John Denver's small plane crashed into Monterey Bay in 1997, the planet lost much more than a talented musician. It lost an advocate, a visionary, and most of all, a friend.

While most people know of Denver's love for wildlife and the environment through megahits such as "Rocky Mountain High" and "Calypso," many don't know how committed Denver was to putting his musical poetry into action.

In 1976, Denver realized a boyhood dream to bring people together to learn from each other, and to connect with the earth. Denver committed his personal resources and partnered with teacher and Aikido master, Tom Crum to establish the Windstar Foundation on almost 1,000 acres of land in Snowmass, Colorado. Windstar's chief mission was to educate the public in making responsible choices and taking action to create a peaceful and environmentally sustainable future.

Now, after a four-year respite following Denver's untimely death, his younger brother, Ron Deutschendorf, has stepped up to the plate to once again turn Windstar into a sanctuary for education, growth, and inspiration based on Denver's founding vision.

While Denver was alive, Windstar thrived for many years as a center of educational seminars and environmental projects nestled in the heart of the Rocky Mountains, aided by friends and many notable celebrities who shared his commitment to the environment. The popular Choices for the Future symposiums drew thousands of attendees over a ten year period and drew nationwide publicity.

However, this time around, Deutschendorf and the Board of Trustees are reviving the Windstar Foundation by enlisting the "grassroots" support

of the many Denver fans and friends of the environment who have been active in keeping John Denver's vision alive in the five years since his death.

CEO Dan McCormick explains how Windstar is shifting its emphasis in this second phase of Windstar's existence, appropriately called "And the Vision Goes Forward."

"Our goal is to transform Windstar from an organization that has focused energy on being a catalyst to one that conducts activities demonstrating our commitment toward the sustainability of this planet," McCormick says.

Windstar has always distinguished itself from other environmental organizations by adopting a holistic approach to the projects and events it supported, that is, the belief that personal, social, and ecological concerns are all necessary components to maintain earth's sustainable future.

In keeping with this belief, Windstar launched a global environmental children's program, hosted ecology students from Moscow University as part of a US/USSR exchange program, and developed an environmental program for disadvantaged urban youth.

Windstar instituted and supported scientific ecology projects as well. Guided by the late Buckminster Fuller, noted architect, mathematician, and inventor of the geodesic dome, Windstar designed and developed a series of stable, self-sustaining garden biodomes nationwide. Each 50-foot diameter biodome contained a passive solar greenhouse with an integrated growing system that could sustain a garden year round and feed a family of four.

In 1980, the Foundation played a key role in the passage of the Alaska National Lands Conservation Act, which includes protection of the controversial Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

Two decades after its inception, the Windstar Foundation joined forces with the Rocky Mountain Institute to buy a portion of the land owned by the National Wildlife Federation and officially establish the not-for-profit

Windstar Land Conservancy foundation. The whale-shaped conservancy land provides a safe refuge for wildlife such as eagles, bears, fox and deer, and serves as a main migration route for elk who travel seasonally between habitats.

According to Executive Director Doug MacDonald, “the unique combination of symposium speakers, and today, the unique content of the education program imparts a sense of connectedness to the earth and to each other that far surpasses pure environmental education.”

As a means toward achieving this end, Windstar is expanding its network of regional Connection Groups designed to carry out action-oriented programs of an educational nature that align with the Windstar Foundation goal of raising environmental awareness, developing leadership potential, and creating more involved, informed, and responsible citizens.

Windstar is particularly focused on reaching the minds and hearts of young people, to “teach them more about their responsibility in protecting our environment, human relations, and culture acceptance in a post-9/11 world,” Dan McCormick explains. The expansion of their education programs primarily targets fourth, fifth, and sixth graders.

The first phase of this expansion program includes two week-long EARTHcamp sessions held on the Conservancy grounds. Each camp session offers children the chance to experience and foster respect for humanity and the environment and to learn how they can make positive choices to effect the world around them, all within the context of a fun-filled week of science, art, and drama.

Plans are for the EARTHcamp program to expand to three other cities this year and perhaps as many as twenty in the future.

Windstar also offers three Environmental Studies Scholarships annually for college students majoring in environmental studies.

A spin-off educational program involves the continued growth of a giant John Denver Memorial Peace Cloth that travels to schools and peace-related events worldwide. Stretching approximately 1500 feet in length, the Peace Cloth is a moving montage of thousands of cloth pieces donated from around the world, many beautifully stitched or decorated in memory of Denver and his dedication to peace.

The Peace Cloth is packaged and sent in individual panels (each 50 feet in length) to schools and events. An accompanying detailed curriculum for grades 2 through 12 is available for download online. The education curriculum is developed to instill young people with an attitude of peace and awareness of the environment in today's complex world.

In addition to its education programs, two mainstays of Windstar are its annual volunteer weekend and open house.

The volunteer weekend is held each spring to spruce up Windstar buildings and grounds. An Open House and Silent Auction are held in the fall in conjunction with a week-long series of events in Aspen, Colorado commemorating Denver's life and his commitment to the environment.

Both events offer Windstar members and supporters a tangible way to be personally involved in preserving Windstar and continue Denver's founding vision.

Deutschendorf, McCormick, and the Windstar Board of Trustees also hope to re-institute the Choices symposiums within a few years.

When asked about his plans for continuing his brother's boyhood vision, Ron Deutschendorf responded, "as far as my vision, I think it would be more honest to say it is "Our Vision," referring to Windstar's many grassroots supporters. "I am just a spark that helped re-start the fire we all share about our future."

"We have a wonderful board and now soon, a group of advisors and connections," Deutschendorf continues, "all of which will help shape our

joint future to make our home, this planet, a place of peace, understanding and good will among all, where there will be a future for all.”

For more information about the Windstar Foundation, please visit their web site at www.windstar.org or contact Jeanie Tomlinson at WindstarCO@wstar.org.

For information on the Peace Cloth educational curriculum, go to: <http://www.johndenverpeacecloth.com/education.html>