



The History of Villa de Vida

A Personal Story by Ted Merchant

I enjoy looking at my past. Life has been full. I have great friends. I attended college and medical school, married Betsy, and raised three delightful children. My career exceeded expectations. Life is good, but not predictable. One day Betsy and I realized our oldest son was developmentally disabled. Dreams and expectations slowly changed. Fear, frustration, anger and loneliness moved into our home. Hope and love did not change but were always challenged. Some nights we went to bed thankful only that we survived. We knew our son's life would not be as full and rewarding as ours had been. How could he safely live? How would he avoid marginalization? How would he, and we, achieve joy and independence?

Life with a developmentally disabled child has taught Betsy and me. We learned that our biggest concern is security for our children. We learned that a joyful life is precious and fragile. We learned that relationships are our most precious gifts and that the quality of our lives is measured by the quality of those relationships. We learned that those values are no different for people with developmental disabilities.

Independence is an interesting privilege. How many of us treasure our independence? All of us! How many of us are totally independent? None of us! We all need each other. None of us would have jobs, relationships, security or resources without each other. We all need community. Again, this reality is the same for people with developmental disabilities. The definition of independence in my mind is: freedom to enjoy who we are.

Our family is fortunate. We discovered a safe supportive community integrated into the City of San Juan Capistrano, California. That community is called Casa de Amma. "Casa" was developed by the Leatherby family after their son attended a post-secondary school on the

East Coast and made real friends for the first time. Like so many others, their son was becoming an adult, about to graduate, and had nowhere to go. The Leatherbys toured the country looking for options and found that none offered the safety, support and relationships they wanted for their son. Casa de Amma was founded as a consequence of hope, love and need. Casa grew slowly. Lessons were learned. Visions were modified and successes celebrated. Casa de Amma was filled to capacity after 6 years of operation. Our family discovered Casa at that time. Our son was invited to join the community. We had to wait eighteen months for an opening. No further openings have developed in the subsequent 5 years! Now the waiting list for Casa de Amma is thirty anxious potential residents long. I assume each family on that list is asking the same question we often asked: "What do we do?"

Our son, now thirty-seven years old, has grown impressively. His challenges remain, but a job replaces unemployment. Confidence replaces fear. Friendships and community replace loneliness. Solutions replace frustrations. Intimacy replaces involution. He is free to enjoy who he is.

Betsy and I want to express our gratitude. We dream.... Could we start another community like Casa de Amma and offer others the security, life style and relationships available to our son? Could we help those who are on waiting lists or wondering how they may find independence for their families and challenged children? We are convinced the answer is YES. It will be great. It will take vision. It will take patience. It will take discernment. The dream is called "Villa de Vida"

Villa de Vida is now a non-profit 501 (c) (3) company. Generous philanthropists have contributed \$3 million. The City of Poway has welcomed us with opened arms and donated three acres at the corner of Pomerado and Oak Knoll Streets, appraised value being \$2.7 million. Additionally, Poway has committed another \$500,000 to start the project. We are applying for significant funding from San Diego County and the California Tax Credit Allocation Committee. Conceptual architectural plans have been created. And fundraisers have started.

We invite you to join us. You can join by being excited. You can join us by telling a friend. You can join us by offering your time talents and/or treasures. I am convinced that efforts such as Villa de Vida bring joy beyond expectation. If you have read this far you must already be one of us. Welcome!

Respectfully,

Ted Merchant, Chairman
Villa de Vida, "Where adults with special needs can live and explore life fully."
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