



30



36



62

Contents

Volume 13, No. 3

FEATURES

- 20 **From the Inside Out**
MWV Gives Back and Pays it Forward
 The Eastern Slope Ski Club's Junior Ski Program
By Tom Eastman
- 36 **Discover Yourself**
Northeast Organic Farming Association-NH
 Grassroots Education for All Farmers
By Kathleen D. Bailey
- 42 **Roadtrip to Remember**
Manchester
 Take a Drive Downtown
By Linda Matchett
- 52 **Magnetic Granite**
Going Fast at Attitash
 Red Parka Pub Challenge Celebrates 40!
By Tom Eastman
- 62 **Every Now & Then**
Mary Johnson
 At Home in NH after 20 Years with Mother Teresa
By Lisa J. Jackson

DEPARTMENTS

- 12 **Family Fun or for Just One**
St. Paddy's Day
 The Granite State Celebrates
By Kristin Flanagan
- 30 **Seasonal Sampler**
Sampling NH Spas
 A Healthy Dose of Wellness
By Cindy Gourgue
- 26 **Food Forethought**
Shhh—Keep it a Secret!
 Zampa Is Just too Good to Share
By Victoria Forester Courtland
- 48 **Room for You**
The Maria Atwood Inn
 Vacate Your Stress
By Rob Levey
- 58 **Artisan Studio**
A Room with a View
 Sandy Martin Brings a Lake to Life
By Sarah Wright
- 68 **Trip to Know Where**
At Home Is How It Is ...
 In Henniker
By David Mills
- 8 **ToDo Town Tell-All**
 16 **Upcoming Events**
 29 **Poetic Justice**
 56 **Arts & Entertainment**



On the cover:

NH's Maple Weekend is on March 23 and 24! Over 100 producers participate with open houses for this sugary celebration—most offer samples, have delicious items to purchase; some have entertainment, sugar on snow, and fun activities, like the Annual Sap Gathering Contest on Saturday, March 23 from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. at Stonewall Farm in Keene, where this image was captured. See page 8. Photo provided by www.partridgebrookreflections.com/JeffNewcomer.

Elliot Gould Photo

Mary Johnson

*At Home in NH after
20 Years with Mother Teresa*

Words By Lisa J. Jackson

Imagine it's the mid-1970s and you're a high school senior. You have plans to go to college to pursue a career in communications. You're young and there are so many options available, but for now, that seems the best fit based on your academic and social interests.



Then, one day, you're walking from one class to another and you pass the library and see the cover of *Time* magazine. The photo of the nun on the cover attracts you so intensely that you go into the library, grab the magazine, and read the entire article without any worry as to the repercussions of skipping a class.

When you finish absorbing the article and the photographs, inspiration warms your stomach, like a fire in a stove. Your future is clear. You don't know the exact details, but you do know, without a doubt, that you are destined to meet and work with Mother Teresa.

Mary Johnson (smiling behind Mother Teresa, with glasses on) served with her for 20 years in the Missionaries of Charity. While in her service she was regarded as the foremost expert, during that time, of Mother Teresa's spirituality. With that understanding of Mother's vision, the Sisters sent her across Europe to teach her message of love. Photo by Mary Johnson.



That is what happened with Mary Johnson, now of Nashua. After a year of mailing numerous letters to "Mother Teresa, Calcutta," because no mailing address was available, Mary eventually made contact with the Missionaries of Charity and received a reply asking her to join them in the Bronx, New York.

In her memoir, *An Unquenchable Thirst: Following Mother Teresa in Search of Love, Service, and an Authentic Life*, Mary shares intimate details of the 20 years she spent as a nun in the order founded by Mother Teresa.

Mary shares how every minute of every day was scheduled from the moment she had to wake up, to when and how to pray, to the chores she had to complete, to what to eat, to the minute she had to be in bed for the evening. She talks about the restrictions on

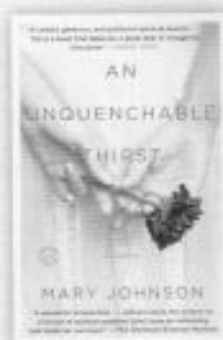
making friends, staying in touch with family, and not being able to write anything down.

She also shares many enjoyable experiences, too, such as when she was present at the

to Texas. She met Darlene Bassett who became her benefactor and supported the *Unquenchable* project.

In 2000, the friends started the non-profit foundation

Mary attended Goddard College in Vermont to work on *Unquenchable* while pursuing and completing an MFA in creative writing. Mary met and married her husband and



"In her memoir, *An Unquenchable Thirst: Following Mother Teresa in Search of Love, Service, and an Authentic Life*, Mary shares intimate details of the 20 years she spent as a nun in the order founded by Mother Teresa."

introduction of Mother Teresa to Princess Diana, living in Rome, and following her heart.

Mary started the *Unquenchable* manuscript after leaving the Missionaries of Charity in 1997 and moving

for women called A Room of Her Own (AROH). Since its inception, AROH has awarded more than \$800,000 to women writers in the form of scholarships, publication prizes, fellowships, and more.

they moved to Nashua in 2007, where Mary immersed herself in the community.

"I think I've written in every coffee shop and restaurant in Nashua at least once," Mary says.

Mary connected with



the New Hampshire Writers' Project organization and found the Southern NH Women's Writing Group who offered tremendous support in getting the voice of the book together and the book proposal written.

Mary also spent time in Peterborough. "I wrote early drafts of several chapters at the MacDowell Colony, when I was a fellow there in 2008. What a great place to write! I still think about that studio in the woods and the company of all those terrific writers and artists."

After finding a publisher, Mary finished her book and saw it published in 2011.

Now considered a humanist author, Mary describes herself as "a passionate advocate for civil discussion about life's big questions." No longer focused on any religion, Mary's purpose for the memoir is to tell her story as honestly and authentically as possible and to open avenues for discussion on life's big questions.

Mary has done readings and led discussions at several colleges and universities including New England College in Henniker where she spoke about "Following, and then leaving Mother Teresa."

Finding Mary

Mary Johnson's website is much like she is—honest, informative, and reflective. You will find updates to various appearance dates around NH. The following web address is not a typo: www.maryjohnson.co

For more info about A Room of Her Own, look online at www.aroho.org.

First Monday of every month: March 4, April 1, May 6, June 3, July 1, August 5, September 2, October 7, November 4, December 2—Martha's Exchange, 185 Main Street, Nashua—Writer's Night Out where writers meet and mingle, sponsored by New Hampshire Writer's Project.

Thursday, March 7—Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) 2013 Convention in Boston, panelist on Religion and Stories: Heretics and Humanists Shift the Perspective (where she talks about Mother Teresa).

Saturday, March 9—Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AW) 2013 Convention in Boston, panelist on I Never Promised You a Rose Garden (where she talks about the AROHO organization).

Saturday, April 6—2013 Writers' Day Conference, SNHU Campus, Hooksett. Mary is leading a workshop on memoir writing called "Life's Million Pieces: Constructing a Faithful Narrative for Your Memoir." The workshop will explore the variety of possible approaches to memoir and some trickier questions that arise when you write about the other people in your life.



Meeting Mary and Asking Life's Big Questions

Mary Johnson shares what a guest might encounter at a "typical" event with her. She says that her events draw people of all sorts of religious backgrounds, young and old, men and women. Mary finds that people "are very engaged at events, listening with great attention, then asking thoughtful questions."

She structures the event based on how familiar people are with the book and her story in general and what the size of the group may be. If it's a group where most of the people have read her story (a book group, for example), then she'll start right in with discussion, and she encourages them to ask questions. "People usually have lots of questions," she says.

If she senses an "opening" in the discussion, she might ask pointed questions, but usually folks have plenty of questions. If it's a group in which many people have not read her book, then will usually give some background and read a bit from *An Unquenchable Thirst*, and then she opens it up for questions. Mary tells us, "To me, the questions are the most interesting part."

She explains more fully:

"At events people ask all sorts of questions, including some very big ones. Some of the most common questions I hear are: What do you believe in now? How do you find meaning in life without belief in God? Why do you think human beings suffer? It's incredible how people open up sometimes—which is just what I had hoped my book would do. By being so honest, I think I give other people permission to be honest about their thoughts and experiences as well. The most intimate moments come more often in smaller groups where people know each other, but they also come at large events. One of the most thoughtful groups I had was at New England College, where—in addition to the regulars from the English and sociology departments—the entire basketball team showed up with their coaches. Those young men wanted to know about service and about breaking with the religious traditions of their families. It was a very moving discussion."

One of Mary's most interesting group discussions about her book has been at Rivier University in Nashua. The private event with three Sisters, three former Sisters, and five women from the community was an intense three-hour conversation with women who had read the book and had a personal connection to the topic.

Mary has spoken at numerous bookstores including the Milford and Peterborough Toadstool Bookshops, Water Street Books and Gibson's Bookstore, and several libraries.

Last Spring, Mary spoke about her experience with Mother Teresa at the Nashua Public Library. People traveled from around the state and two women drove from Toronto, Canada to this event to meet Mary and share in the discussion. The 99-seat auditorium only had one empty seat.

"I especially enjoy talking with people who have read the book," Mary says. "I love speaking with groups large and small, secular and religious, men and women, students and senior citizens. For decades, I've been privileged to challenge people to ask big questions—and then provide innovative tools of support and discovery to help each individual journey to his or her own answers."

Mary has been interviewed on the phone, NHPR, via online chatrooms, and Skype. She appreciates the numerous ways she can reach her audience. She's also been on television.

"I was sitting at River Walk Café when a tweet came from Rosie [O'Donnell] saying she read my book and wanted to have me on her show," Mary said. "I went outside and did little jig in the snow."

Mary is at work on her second non-fiction book while celebrating and promoting the paperback release of *Unquenchable*. She's filling her calendar with speaking engagements on numerous topics including personal growth, writing, Mother Teresa, women's issues, and interfaith and secular themes.

Mary appreciates the work people put into crafting memories. "It is challenging for people to talk about deeply personal experiences." And she knows how difficult it is to decide what to include and what to leave out of a memoir. She recommends that writers read a lot and read widely as well as connect with other writers. "When writing your memoir, be very honest and don't hold anything back," she says. "The reader will know if you do."

As for the 20-year career choice, Mary doesn't have regrets. "I was privileged to get to know Mother as much as I did."

Mary now savors embracing the mysteries of life, living mindfully, and pursuing activities such as yoga, gardening, and cycling. She also remains quite involved with AROHO.

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