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'Hugging Saint' draws many from region seeking spiritual guidance

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NEW YORK — Amid the bustle and music, Brian McConnell waited patiently to meet Amma, the widely recognized humanitarian leader who became his spiritual anchor after he lost his leg three months ago in an accident.

When his turn came, the 23-year-old Katonah man was enveloped in the perfumed embrace of Amma, whose real name is Mata Amritanandamayi Devi.

Tears rolled down his cheeks, and in a gesture that devotees say is the essence of her humanity, Amma wiped away his tears and held him closely.

McConnell, a dancer, was introduced to Amma five years ago by his girlfriend, Sara Rubin, but his faith had become intense over the last three years. During their embrace, McConnell said, he asked Amma for her help in dealing with his loss.

"She said, 'If you have faith you will dance again,' " said Rubin, 56, who helped McConnell move close to Amma.

On Tuesday, more than a thousand people thronged the Manhattan Center on West 34th Street for a chance to behold Amma, who is known the world over as the "Hugging Saint."

Amma, 56, travels the world and holds audience for her devotees. who come from all faiths, ethnicities, nationalities, ages, and social and economic backgrounds. She is recognizable with her white sari, diamond nose stud, and large vermilion and ash dot on her forehead.

She is most respected for her charitable work. Her organization runs hospitals, orphanages and a university. It has been at the forefront in providing disaster relief after the 2001 earthquake in India, the tsunami in Asia, Hurricane Katrina and the earthquake in Haiti, according to her website www.amma.org.

Earlier this year, SUNY Buffalo conferred on her an honorary doctorate in humane letters.

While her outreach and charities attract worldwide support and commendations, her trademark embrace gets her a lot of notice.

Devotees estimate Amma has hugged 30 million devotees since she began embracing people as a teen.

When asked why she hugged people, Amma responded through an interpreter, "It's

like asking the river, why do you flow? It's in my nature to express love. We are all bound to express true love. ... Through hugs I am trying to awaken true love in people."

On Tuesday, incense and Indian devotional music filled the Hammerstein Ballroom at the Manhattan Center, better known for hosting concerts and product launches.

Devotees had set up booths in the basement for selling Amma merchandise and hot Indian vegetarian food to raise money for various charities.

Hundreds of devotees sat patiently waiting for their turn for "darshan" or an audience with Amma.

Many meditated in yogic postures, telling the beads of their rudaraksh rosary as vocalists and musicians sang and performed music on the stage.

Some devotees seemed overcome by emotions following the embrace. A few could be seen with tears coursing down their cheeks; one female kneeled and bent double after the embrace, her body wracked by sobs.

Esmeralda Williamson-Noble of Irvington good-humoredly described Tuesday's scene as "organized chaos."

A longtime devotee, Williamson-Noble said she found great emotional and spiritual support in Amma after the suicide of her 20-year-old son last year.

Explaining Amma's charisma, Williamson-Noble said, "I was just drawn like fish to water. I didn't understand all that was going on. I just fell in love with Amma."

Anthony Stropoli, a Manhattan actor who grew up in Orangeburg, has toured with Amma throughout the United States. He was at the Manhattan Center on Tuesday assisting those who needed special help to see Amma.

"What people don't realize in America is that, in India, getting just a glimpse of Amma is considered a great blessing," said Stropoli, whose acting including a bit part in the HBO series "The Sopranos" in which he played one of Vito's love interests. "They will wait 12 to 14 hours in the sun without a blink."

At the Manhattan Center, too, visitors got Amma's full attention, for at least 30 seconds.

Each walked away from Amma with a gift of an apple or a Hershey's kiss or both.

"There's not one person she would refuse for any reason at all," said Stropoli, 46, whose spiritual name is Gowrish. "It's a personal experience for everyone."

Recalling the first time Amma embraced him in a hug, he said, "I had a feeling of being home. It's hard to put into words."
