

# Amma 'the Hugging Saint' back in Coralville

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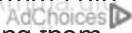
Mata Amritanandamayi, better known as Amma "the Hugging Saint," embraces Kelley Kolberg, left, and Jacque Gharib on Sunday at the Coralville Marriott and Conference Center. / Josh O'Leary / Iowa City Press-Citizen

Written by **Josh O'Leary**

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It had been a challenging week for Jacque Gharib and her partner, Kelley Kolberg. But for the Iowa City couple, a simple hug Sunday proved to be a healing experience, as Kolberg described it afterward.

The two were among the thousands who found themselves in the embrace of Mata Amritanandamayi, better known as Amma "the Hugging Saint," this weekend in Coralville, where the Indian spiritual leader returned for the fourth time in five years for a series of appearances.

Sunday morning, inside a conference room at the Coralville Marriott and Conference Center, Amma did not address the audience of several hundred, but instead led them in meditation before receiving them for hugs, one after another. 

"It's just this wonderful calm that comes over you," Gharib said after she and Kolberg wrapped their arms around Amma together. "Warmth and bliss. It's indescribable, in a way."

Gharib had undergone major surgery just a few days before, but it was important for the couple to see Amma on her return trip to the area -- one of just 11 stops on her summer tour through the U.S.

"She's so inspiring because of all the good she does for the world," Kohlberg said. "She finds time for everybody, accepts everybody and doesn't turn anybody away."

Amma, 57, has blessed and consoled more than 30 million people worldwide over the past 35 years and has founded numerous charities, according to literature her followers distributed. Through the simple act of hugging -- sometimes thousands upon thousands of people who flock to see her a day -- Amma has spread her message of love and service to humanity around the globe and has become recognized as one of the world's foremost spiritual leaders.

Bev Noia, who goes by Janani, is a former college professor in the U.S. who has worked alongside Amma the past 18 years, and was one of the nearly 200 followers who made the trip from India to the U.S. for this year's tour.

An archivist for Amma's Mata Amritanandamayi Math in Kerala, India, Noia documents the "Embracing the World Campaign" for the organization and has seen the profound effect Amma has on people. Rather than preaching a particular brand of religion, Amma brings people together of all faith backgrounds with her universal message, Noia said.

"She says, 'My religion is love, and what I'm trying to do is help people develop a deeper truth in their own religion,'" said Noia, who had a Christian upbringing.

Some see Amma as a saint, others a humanitarian and others still a god. Noia admits with a shrug that she's still trying to figure it out.

"She makes no claims about herself," Noia said. "And what do I think? I'm mystified. I'm always thinking, 'Who is this being?' But I can say the last 18 years have not been wasted, because what she's doing is good."

Sri Nivas of Cedar Falls had brought his family to see Amma for the first time Sunday. Awaiting his hug, he said he was impressed with her message.

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