

A Hershey's Kiss and a squeeze of bliss

More than 2,000 in Andover greet India's 'hugging saint'

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ANDOVER -- The tiny sign planted in the grass of the Rolling Green Ramada Inn yesterday simply stated "Ammachi," with an arrow pointing the way.

To her followers, Ammachi needed no further explanation.

The small woman dressed in a white sari drew a crowd of more than 2,000 to the hotel's ballroom last night, wrapping her arms around each and every one. Dubbed the "hugging saint," the Indian guru has brought peace to masses of people throughout India, Europe and America through the simple act of a hug.

Surrounded by her followers, who create a human circle around her, Ammachi, or Amma, encapsulated families or individuals with her wide arms. She pressed each person close to her sweet-smelling sari, kissed their cheek, and handed them rose petals and a Hershey's Kiss.

During her hugs, she whispered "son, son, son" or "daughter, daughter, daughter" in Malayalam, her native language.

While it may seem a small act, it left many devotees deeply moved. Several ducked out of the human circle with eyes brimming with tears.

"I'm still shaking," said Dr. Ragu C. Nathan, a Boston radiologist originally from southern India.

Amma, born Mata Amritanandamayi, rose from an impoverished childhood in southern India to her homeland status as a living saint. She has been known to hug 18,000 people in one day in India without a rest.

The daughter of a poor fisherman, Amma was said to be an outcast because of a bluish hue to her skin at birth. Her schooling ended at 9 years old, when she was obligated to

perform full-time family chores.

Despite her own poverty, she began serving others, dedicating her life to help the elderly, sick and starving. She continues her works of charity to this day, establishing new hospitals, schools and orphanages in India and a collection of soup kitchens in America.

Rest is not something Amma needs.

"She's setting a perfect example of selfless love to the world, and the tireless hugs are a part of that," said Rob Sidon, a spokesperson for her tour.

Since her small beginnings in India, Amma has achieved worldwide recognition, speaking at the invitation of U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan at the Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders.

While known for her hugs, Amma also speaks to her large crowds, encouraging them to find self-love and dedicate themselves to devotion to God.

"Love is the foundation of a happy life, but, knowingly or unknowingly, we are disregarding this great truth," she said through her interpreter.

After her speech came music and meditation. Attendees clapped with the frenetic songs, moving their entire bodies as they danced along, throwing arms in the air and shaking hips to the beat. After the exhaustive dance, lights were dimmed and the audience meditated and prayed to be filled with the divine presence of Amma.

Those who waited got a more personal glimpse of the presence, as she took each in for the darshan, a Sanskrit word meaning "audience with a saint or sage." The line was long, but newcomers and devotees alike grasped red slips with numbers and waited, sitting on the floor, for their turn.

Jane Stevens of Somerville clutched token No. 757 as she waited by the side of the ballroom. It was her first experience with Amma.

"I've heard she's amazing. I'm curious," she said.

Those who have already experience the love from Amma still come back for more. Krishnamoorthy Dinesh, a software consultant in Bedford, first saw Amma in India and admired her endless hugs. Then he got one himself.

"She's just consoling you, she's just understanding all of your problems. That's how I felt," he said.

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