

'The Hugging Saint' visits Bellevue



India's native "Hugging Saint" is at the Bellevue Hyatt this weekend, sharing her loving embrace as part of a perennial world tour.

Mata Amritanandamayi Devi provides all the comfort of a teddy bear that hugs back.

Known simply as "Amma" or "The Hugging Saint" to most, she travels the world like a modern-day Jesus, spreading love and comforting the afflicted. Some say she even heals the sick.

Amma's goal, as described on her web site, is to serve as a living example of love and devotion.

"There is infinite love in us all," she told The Reporter through an interpreter. "Even though we are kings in this regard, we act like beggars."

Amma began her mission to quell human suffering at an early age. She started around 7, washing the clothes of elderly neighbors and bringing food scraps to the poor.

By 1981, she had a large following, and many considered her to be a sort of love guru who could spread happiness with the human touch.

Amma eventually gained world renown as a humanitarian, giving most of her tens of millions of dollars in yearly proceeds to charity.

[Her organization](#) donated \$46 million to victims of the Southeast Asian tsunami in 2004 and provided \$1 million to support victims of Hurricane Katrina.

The group also built a hospital in India, and is now working to establish an orphanage in Haiti to help victims of the earthquake that devastated that country this year.

Around 1,000 Amma devotees filled an event hall at the Hyatt on Friday morning to see the spiritual leader. Organizers were expecting a larger crowd that evening for a second round of hugs and an address. Attendees lined up by the dozen for Amma's embrace.

Some looked peaceful and healthy. Others came on walkers, in leg braces, or with bald heads from cancer treatment.

A few looked like they hadn't been hugged in years as Amma clasped them in her arms – kissing heads, caressing cheeks, and gently patting backs.

Linda Brenden traveled from Denmark to attend the event. She recently divorced from her husband, and came to the program with her 4-year-old daughter, Iben English.

"This will be sort of a new-family hug for me," Brenden said. "I feel like this is a blessing for our new lives together, just the two of us."

Amma uses a handheld counter to track each embrace. She claims to have hugged more than 29 million people.

As for what the recipients get from those encounters, it varies.

"The hug itself is weird," Brenden said. "It's different every time, depending on where you're at in your life."

Amma's visit on Friday included two six-hour shifts, with nearly all the time spent on "darshan," or giving out hugs. The only exception was when she delivered a speech that evening.

Her programs are free and open to the public, although gifts, books, and food are on sale in the waiting areas.

A second event will take place at the Bellevue Hyatt on Sunday, beginning at 7 p.m., and a retreat is scheduled for her devotees from Friday night through Sunday afternoon.

Amma lives in a religious retreat called Amritapuri, located in the South Indian village where she was born 56 years ago into a poor fishing family.

Around 5,000 devotees now live at Amritapuri. They eat a vegetarian diet, abstain from drugs, and spend much of their time meditating, doing yoga, and chanting.

Each person stays on their own dime and performs community duties of their own accord.

Amma has additional followers worldwide who volunteer for her yearly events.

"She never asks for anything for herself," said one devotee from California who goes by the name Darsana. "Because of that, people feel inspired and want to help out."

Indeed, it is devotion to others that makes Amma tick.

"Where there is love, you always feel as fresh as a newly blossomed flower," she said. "The more you identify with true love, the more you feel inspired."

Perhaps that explains how she makes it through those six-hour shifts.