

'Hugging Saint' draws many from region seeking spiritual guidance

BY HEMA EASLEY AND SHAWN COHEN • HEASLEY@LOHUD.COM • JULY 11, 2010

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



Mata Amritanandamayi Devi, also known as the "Hugging Saint," embraces Brian McConnell of Katonah on Tuesday at the Manhattan Center in New York City during her worldwide

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 included 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."