

Iowa Town Booms On Eastern Ways

Meditation, Business Draw Residents

By Kari Lydersen

Special to The Washington Post

Monday, August 9, 2004; Page A03

VEDIC CITY, Iowa -- When Eric Schwartz decided to move his financial services business from Silver Spring here to southeastern Iowa so he could join other practitioners of Transcendental Meditation in 1992, he worried that clients and colleagues might think he was a little crazy.

"Some people think TM [Transcendental Meditation] is some kind of cult or devil worship," he said. "I thought it might be negative for my business, that customers would freak out."



Practitioners of Transcendental Meditation participate in the 2001 ceremony inaugurating Vedic City. Many people come to the town to study meditation. (Brad Whitney - Ottumwa Courier Via The AP)

Things turned out just the opposite.

With much lower overhead, he found revenue for Cambridge Investment Research rising from one year to the next. He went from a gross revenue of about \$500,000 a year in the D.C. area to more than \$50 million in 2002. The magazine *Investment Advisor* named him broker-dealer of the year in 2003. He credits Transcendental Meditation, which he began practicing as a freshman at Amherst College in 1971, for fueling his success.

"Even if investors or customers aren't interested in TM, they are attracted to the fact that I moved here to do this, that I'm concerned about more than just making money or having an ocean view," said Schwartz, who is considering changing his title from chief executive to chief spiritual officer. "That's the kind of business they want to be involved with."



Many other people in Vedic City and neighboring Fairfield feel the same way. The community founded by followers of the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, the Beatles' meditation guru, has become an entrepreneurial mecca of the Midwest. Followers began flocking to Fairfield after the establishment of the Maharishi University of Management in 1974, and Vedic City just outside the limits of Fairfield was incorporated in 2001, the first new Iowa city to be incorporated since 1982. Residents estimate that one-fourth of the 10,000 people in Fairfield and Vedic City practice TM.

Other successful businesses run by TM devotees include MarathonFoto, billing itself as the largest event photography company in the country; Creative Edge Master Shop, which manufactures intricate floor and wall murals out of marble and granite for Disney, the Chicago Bulls and other clients; and the Raj Ayurveda Health Center, a spa which draws national visitors paying hundreds of dollars a day. City officials say more than \$200 million in venture capital has been invested in Fairfield and Vedic City companies during the past 13 years.

"For a small town in the Midwest to have so many successful businesses is really unbelievable," said Rashi Glazer, co-director of the Center for Marketing and Technology at the University of California at Berkeley, who spends summers in Fairfield. "It means something's going on here."

Vedic is a Sanskrit word meaning "totality of knowledge." Residents live in spacious homes designed with entrances facing east, small onion domes called *kailashes* on top and rooms oriented to correspond with the cycles of the sun and moon. Practitioners of TM generally meditate for 20 minutes twice a day.

The area's TM practitioners are not just being noticed for their entrepreneurship. For 15 years, the fully accredited Maharishi University of Management has been conducting studies funded by the National Institutes of Health on the effects of meditation on cardiovascular health, with a specific focus on how meditation can benefit African Americans with a high risk of heart disease.

"The physiological effects of this technique include a high degree of orderliness in the brain waves, which seems to spread throughout the body with lower levels of stress hormones, lower blood pressure, less reactivity to stress," said Robert Schneider, a physician who completed a fellowship in hypertension at the University of Michigan Medical School and now serves as dean of Vedic medicine at Maharishi University.

Vedic City passed a resolution banning the sale of non-organic food and runs an organic farming operation that sells produce to Whole Foods Market and other outlets in Chicago

and across Iowa. Farm director Dean Goodale notes that the farm includes one of the few greenhouses in the region that grow plants in soil rather than with hydroponics.

"Conventional farmers associate soil with bacteria and they want to kill all the bacteria," he said. "But bacteria serves a purpose in making certain nutrients available to plants. It's a symbiotic relationship."

Across the street from the farm is the start of a housing project called "Abundance Ecovillage," which will be powered by solar and wind energy. Vedic City and Fairfield receive federal grants from agencies including the Department of Energy and the Department of Agriculture for developing renewable energy sources and running recycling and composting programs.

"The composting program will make use of yard waste from the city, kitchen waste from the Raj restaurant, plant waste from the farm and manure from [a nearby] organic llama farm," said Kent Boyum, an aquatic toxicologist who directs Vedic City's Energy Department-funded Rebuild America program. "The compost will be used in the greenhouse and marketed as specialty soil from Vedic City."

Residents say most people moved here from the coasts to study meditation and related practices at Maharishi University or to send their children to Maharishi School, an elementary and high school that includes meditation, Sanskrit and ayurvedic medicine in its regular curriculum.

"There weren't many jobs for people moving in, so they had to become entrepreneurial and create jobs," said Ed Malloy, a TM practitioner who is president of Danaher Oil Co. and was elected mayor of Fairfield in 2001. "Meditation is about really perfecting and exploring human potential, so it makes sense these people tend to be highly motivated and creative."

Jonathan Lipman and his wife, Pam Whitworth, quit careers in Washington to move to Fairfield seven years ago. Since then, Lipman, a former president of the Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy, has designed only Vedic-style homes. Whitworth, an artist, started a business making pillows out of old kimonos and other fabrics imported from Japan, which are sold in an exclusive store in Manhattan and have been featured in home design magazines.

"She figured it was either get a job at Wal-Mart or start a business," Lipman said.

Mario Orsatti, a Philadelphia native who studied with the Maharishi in Europe and moved to Fairfield in 1978, noted that the growing acceptance and popularity of alternative medicine and Eastern philosophy are also key to the area's success.

"It was a lot different 30 years ago," he said. "There was a lot of suspicion of things that are foreign, things from India. Today lots of people are doing yoga and meditation, looking at our tradition and saying, 'That is so cool.' Lots of small midwestern towns are

dying, but Fairfield and Vedic City are thriving. People are moving here instead of moving away. Iowa would love to see this happening everywhere."