

**Austin American Statesman**

**A place for mind, body, spirit in the Hill Country  
Upscale retreat taps into growing market for 'cultural creatives'**

By R. Michelle Breyer and Patrick Beach

In case you needed more proof that Austin doesn't really belong in Texas, head out to a rugged hilltop west of town.

On 200 acres in the Balcones Canyonlands Preserve, the \$20 million Omega at the Crossings educational retreat, spa and conference facility hopes to awaken the human spirit, rejuvenate the body and foster peace and wisdom.

The complex, which opens Friday, is the dream of Ken and Joyce Beck, sturdy Midwesterners who raised a family, built successful careers and see the "progressive learning center and meeting place" as a convergence of their parallel interests of a balanced life and hard-nosed business realities.

This is substantially more ambitious than buying a Winnebago or turning one's wood-working hobby into a small business. But the Becks have the means to build a facility that they hope will help rebalance the lives of thousands of people throughout Texas and the Southwest – a venture they say is both viable and self-sustaining.

Ken Beck joined Dell Inc. in 1988, enjoyed seven stock splits and was the company's director of sales operations, retiring in 2000. He did quite well – exactly how well he declines to say.

What he will say is that there was a strong desire to give back, to make a significant difference in people's lives.

"What do you do with what you've been given?" Beck asked.

He's the left brain; Joyce, a psychotherapist, is the right brain.

"We tend to different things," she said. "I tend to relationships and celebrating the moment, and Ken is an operational director."

Joining with the Omega Institute of Rhinebeck, N.Y., the couple aim to raise the bar for retreat centers: posh enough for business travelers who find eschewing creature comforts an unwelcome prospect – the healthy food tastes so good it could pass for unhealthy – serene enough to invite contemplation, rustic enough to have a strong regional presence and flexible enough to have packages, programs and fees to fit a range of budgets.

The made-to-be-marketed term they've landed on is Tex-Zen. Which, come to think of it, perfectly describes Austin singer-songwriter and sometime Flatlander, Jimmie Dale

Gilmore, who, not coincidentally, will be teaching a song-writing course at the facility beginning Sept. 8, and has taught at the Rhinebeck campus.

How did two Lutherans from Minnesota end up founding a place where a one-time chiropractor will teach a course on how he can heal people with ghastly diseases by simply holding his hands near them? Joyce Beck traveled a lot and was exposed to many religions, and both of them are paragons of tolerance. Both have participated in a spirituality group. They were also entering a phase of their lives, as are many empty-nest Baby Boomers, where they have the time to ask: What's next? In the case of the Becks, they also had the means to make something happen.

"So by '95," he said, "the idea of a nondenominational learning center was not that far off."

Tom Green, Dell's general counsel, said he knew Ken Beck only "well enough to know I wish I'd had time to get to know him better" and characterized his former colleague as "always a hard charger, determined. I always had a sense that he had more to accomplish. When I started hearing about the Crossings, it didn't surprise me at all."

The Becks found the land in October 1998 and made it their own by camping on it, in a spot with a Hill Country view that is now the deck outside the main dining hall. And the couple, who've been on the Omega Institute board since 1999, did more than get their chakras aligned.

The retreat had to make economic sense. It is, after all, a for-profit enterprise. The Becks conducted focus groups to determine whether the population would respond to such a place, and they wrote a business plan, with a six-year financial forecast.

"There's no question that our intent all along is that this facility would sustain itself," Ken Beck said.

He believes the Crossings will be running in the black by the middle of next year, although he says they probably never will recoup the massive investment made in the land and the facility.

### **The LOHAS life**

The Crossings is fortunate to be part of a burgeoning industry fueled by consumers willing to spend money, an estimated \$230 billion a year, to realize their potential.

It's called LOHAS – lifestyles of health and sustainability – and the industry has been growing in the double digits every year, according to the Colorado-based LOHAS Journal. The National Marketing Institute found that these LOHAS consumers make up more than 32 percent of all U.S. households – roughly 68 million people.

This industry encompasses everything from organic produce to yoga retreats to hybrid cars. There has been a boom in demand for books on the environment, social change and

personal growth, including yoga, meditation and fitness as the New Age category has become more mainstream, according to Publishers Weekly.

It includes such retreats as Esalen on the California coast and Oregon's Breitenbush Hot Spring, as well as more traditional health spas and conference centers, where programs now include such subjects as spirituality, alternative medicine and personal development.

These LOHAS customers aren't just Birkenstock-wearing, tofu-munching, tree-hugging hippies. They are people of all ages, political ideologies, education levels and religions.

Paul Ray, a sociologist and author from the Bay Area, coined the term "cultural creatives" seven years ago to describe this growing subculture of people who are in search of a more balanced lifestyle.

"You're talking about an extremely large population," said Ray, who co-wrote "The Cultural Creatives: How 50 Million People are Changing the World."

"Cultural creatives look average," Ray said. "Anytime you're talking about a quarter of the population, you're talking about mainstream people."

"But they've changed their values and they've changed their lifestyles," he said. "They want what's going on in their inner life to match their outer life – in business, in politics, in society. There's a demand for authenticity."

Cultural creatives, Ray said, are the core market for such places as the Omega Institute.

"The Crossings was created by cultural creatives, for cultural creatives," Ray said.

And since Sept. 11, their appetite for these goods and services has only escalated, Ray said.

"September 11 has really made us think about who we are and what's important to us," said Gwynne Rogers, strategic marketing analyst for the Pennsylvania-based Natural Marketing Institute.

In Austin, a hotbed of LOHAS consumers, these businesses have seen a surge in demand, making it one of the area's few growth industries.

### **Something for everyone**

The Becks see a variety of markets for the Crossings, from "the seekers" in search of wisdom and balance in their lives, to the professionals wanting to further their education, to businesses looking for a first-rate conference venue.

Participants can come for seminars as diverse as learning ecstatic dance, writing a monologue with Jaston Williams or cooking with chocolate. The teachers hail from around the globe.

For those who would rather just get away from it all, the Crossings offers rest and renewal retreats, where services range from watsu aquatic massage to salt glows to acupuncture. The luxurious wellness center and spa houses 11 private therapy rooms, hot tub and cold dip, and sauna and an outdoor pool with a waterfall, as well as a gift shop with herbal skin care and body care lines.

The Crossings also rents out its facilities to what Ken Beck calls “like-minded businesses” for conferences, meetings and retreats.

In October, Whole Foods Market, Inc. is renting out the entire facility for its Future Search meeting, a five-day conference of 138 team members, vendors and customers to map out the company’s strategy for the next five years. In addition to the state-of-the-art conference facilities, the company also was attracted to many other aspects of the facility – from the way the rooms are positioned to capture the sunrise and sunset to the natural Texas setting of the grounds to the luxurious spa facility.

“They seem to get it,” said Leslie Ireland, a national travel director for Whole Foods. “They’re aligned with the Whole Foods culture. They didn’t blink when I asked for vegan entrees.”

Guests can spend as much or as little as they want. Day campers can come for the classes or the spa facilities. A weekend retreat at the spa, not counting room and board is \$130, including a one-hour massage.

The programs range from \$195 for “Introduction to Holistic Living” to \$325 for “The Joy of the Swing” to \$900 for “PaRama Bodytalk Training,” not counting room and board.

Two nights in the bunkhouse, where you get your own room but must share a bathroom, costs \$210, including meals, entertainment and options such as yoga, water aerobics and use of the pool. Single occupancy in the lodge is \$450 for a weekend. The Crossings can accommodate 350 people, with a sleeping capacity of 165.

Because the facility is part of a habitat preserve, the Becks agreed to develop only 35 acres. Recycled or environmentally friendly materials, such as a meeting room’s bamboo floor instead of hardwood, are used throughout. Almost all the grounds are Xeriscaped.

In terms of design, the buildings resemble those one might see on a Hill Country farmstead. Proximity to the natural environment is emphasized with materials such as limestone walls inside and out.

Last week, in the days before The Crossings’ soft opening, the place was abuzz with workers racing to finish last-minute touches. It looked like the Becks had a lot of work ahead of them, but Joyce seemed stress-free and serene amid the cacophony. It’ll get done on time, she said. Or it won’t.

“Hey, that’s all right,” she said.