

## **Austin Idealist**

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### **The Crossings, Austin's New Creative Learning Center**

By Owen McAleer

Once Joyce and Ken Beck began to realize the enormity of the wealth they were accumulating from the tech boom and their Dell computer stock, they also began to feel the responsibility that came with it. Then came literally years of praying for guidance and seeking advice from trusted friends. Now the Becks are more than halfway through a construction project that will result in a creative learning center that will potentially attract participants from all over the country and teachers from all over the world. However, the biggest impact of this 210-acre campus named "The Crossings" will be felt on a local level.

Networking with Austin-area talent is a priority. "We want to use local and regional people," says Joyce Beck. "We want that community involvement." Austin already has a healthy holistic community. But the Crossings, along with its partner, the Omega Institute, will make Austin a national destination for spiritual growth, not only for individuals, but also for business and community organizations.

The Becks are already in discussions with local organizations such as Seton Cove, the Academy of Oriental Medicine at Austin, Austin Social Venture Partners, and Whole Foods Market, plus a variety of individual teachers and holistic practitioners from the area.

When completed and opened in 2003, the Crossings will employ between 50 and 100 people in addition to the teachers and practitioners that will conduct more than 350 classes and seminars per year. The campus will consist of 14 buildings with a total of 80,000 square feet, and will include onsite housing, a conference center and meeting rooms, a dining hall and café, a wellness center and spa with saunas, steam rooms, a Watsu pool, a movement room, and a gift shop. Outside there will be hiking trails, gardens, a sanctuary, and meditation locations. This is not a small project.

The Crossings is located in the Balcones Canyonlands Preserve along Cypress Creek about a mile north of Lake Travis on FM 2769. Only 30 of the 210 acres will be developed; the remainder will be a conservation easement held by Travis County. "There will never be any development on that land," says Ken Beck. "Over and over again, we've tried to do things to honor where we are – to honor the land."

### **The Process**

The name "The Crossings" has come to signify the crossing over of two lives – the two careers of Ken and Joyce. What do you get when you cross an engineer who became a sales executive for Dell computer with a woman who originally wanted to be a Lutheran minister but chose to be a psychotherapist for the past 30 years? Well, you get a dynamic

duo that is not only task oriented and skilled at building relationships, but also grounded in spiritual principles and economic ones as well.

Ken and Joyce were both born in Minnesota, met in junior high, and graduated from the same high school. Both graduated from college in Minnesota in 1967, and they got married soon afterward. “Church was important to both of us, and it was real obvious it was going to be important to us together,” says Ken. “What Joyce really brought to me was the importance of spirituality and the importance of family.”

The ideas for the Crossings all started in the early ‘90s with the incredible success of Dell and how much wealth it gave them. “We had been given this gift. We realized we have some responsibility to do something with it – other than just buy things,” says Ken. “That was the beginning.”

“That was the beginning of praying for guidance,” says Joyce. “We started asking people that we cared about, ‘what would you do?’”

“Even the dreaming process was one of interacting with a lot of people,” Ken adds. Some of the early ideas talked about were a retreat center, a wellness center, or a conference center.

The Becks have been attending a spirituality group at their church, Triumphant Love Lutheran, on Monday nights for the last eight years. Many of the people in that group now serve on the Crossings advisory board. Through relationships in that original group the Becks met a board member of the Omega Institute who introduced them to Omega co-founders Stephen Rechtschaffen and Elizabeth Lesser.

The Omega Institute, in Rhinebeck, N.Y., is the nation’s largest holistic learning center and has been incorporated as a non-profit educational institution since 1977. Now, Omega and The Crossings are partners in the Austin project. “It wasn’t just our ideas,” says Joyce. “It was everybody’s ideas going into the pot of what we were creating.”

The Becks found the land for the Crossings in October 1998, met the Omega people the following November, and completed the land purchase in March 1999. Milkshake Media, a local marketing group, came on board that year and began to hold planning meetings about what the center should be, what the core values should be, and what things should be accomplished. The Becks interviewed architects and contractors and soon put together a project team.

During it all, the Becks have employed the principles that they believe in. “They are living examples of what they want this place to teach people,” says Katherine Jones, founder of Milkshake Media.

“We start our meetings by going around giving everybody hugs,” say Ken. “Joyce started this thing at the end of our meetings where we give people accolades. That’s not the normal process in the commercial construction world.” They have regular lunches

with all the construction crews and acknowledge the subcontractors as well. “To me it’s about including everybody in the process,” says Joyce.

At one point during the construction, two different companies (a commercial contractor and a residential contractor) erected a fence to separate their respective parts of the project. The Becks didn’t like it. It didn’t seem to go along with the spirit of the project. “It just doesn’t fit who I am,” says Joyce. “I’m just not a fence person.” After a meeting, the fence came down and the two companies learned to cooperate. “As each person has gotten involved with us, they have taken on the dream,” says Ken.

### **The Programs**

Years of life experience as executive and therapist, husband and wife, mother and father, plus countless meetings and dinners with friends and associates, have produced the following mission statement for The Crossings: “The purpose of the Crossings is to provide new experiences that expand thought and inspire people to explore conscious choices in their personal, work, and spiritual lives.”

Ken describes the teaching paradigm of Omega’s Elizabeth Lesser, where the soul is at the center of the person. “It’s your relationship to a Supreme Being,” he says. “That is probably the most important thing for any individual to establish.” The mind, body, and heart rotate around that center, that set of values, that relationship. This is the idea behind most of the programs the Omega Institute currently offers. Last May, Omega and the Crossings organized a weekend conference at Austin’s Renaissance Hotel titled “The Heart of Happiness.” They offered more than 50 workshops and keynote speeches from a variety of inspirational authors and teachers, including Ram Dass, Wayne Dyer, and Oriah Mountain Dreamer.

But in addition to the “seeker market” that Omega already addresses, The Crossings is also going to produce classes and seminars for professionals who need continuing education units. It’s all part of the dream of bringing spirituality and balance into the workplace. It’s all part of the crossing of therapist and businessman.

There will also be “The Business Institute at the Crossings,” a group of programs aimed at business organizations. “How can I show a company that a well-balanced employee that is maintaining the right priorities in life is a better employee, a more productive employee over the long run? This is our challenge,” says Ken.

The business programs will concentrate on three areas: leadership training that embraces a more holistic approach to employees; social responsibility concepts that teach that business has a responsibility to give back to the community; and business ethics and integrity concepts that will hopefully help companies avoid scandalous behavior. Joyce adds, “One of the themes we want to develop is how to promote a particular culture within your company.”

Programs will vary in length from a morning class or a day-long seminar to weekend packages or three- to four-day stays. There will be a variety of overnight accommodations, from single private rooms to double occupancy, or a small room in the

“bunk house” with common men’s and women’s bathrooms. Also, a certain percentage of proceeds will go to a scholarship fund, and there will be work-study programs to help keep the costs within everyone’s budget. “A person can just come for a weekend just be in this space for a personal retreat,” says Joyce.

Although Omega will be producing classes and seminars in the Austin area over the next year, The Crossings won’t officially open until Sept 4, 2003.

### **The Commitment**

One thing that is apparent after a visit with Ken and Joyce is their commitment to their core values of growth, balance, and sanctuary. These ideas go beyond their personal life and relationship to each other, beyond their immediate family and children. These values are apparent in the product that they are producing in the hills west of Austin. “One of our values is a commitment to ecology and sustainability,” Ken says.

A case in point is when it came time to put in the roads. They made the decision to use cement rather than an oil-based surface. Ken explains that cement is more expensive in the short term, but it has less impact on the environment, no fossil fuel runoff, and will probably last longer.

Also, all the buildings have decks and porches made from a recycled plastic composite that should last virtually forever. The Becks used hardy plank for the siding on all the buildings, which is a concrete material. They even found a company (Interface Carpets) that makes recyclable carpet so that when it is time to replace the carpet the old stuff is recyclable. Most carpets must be disposed of in a landfill.

The Crossings has a completely self-sustaining water system including a well, a purification system, a wastewater collection and treatment facility, and a high tech, low-impact surface drip irrigation system for disposal of effluent water. Building roofs are made of metal rather than an oil-based shingle, which allows for an elaborate rainwater collection system that is used for irrigating the gardens and trees.

All hardwood trees have been saved, even if it meant delays in construction and higher costs. Every effort has been made to save the environment and create a special place. The Becks believe that employing the correct principles during the process is not only the right way to build a project, but also the way to end up with the best results.