



PHOTO BY STEVE TACKEFF

Lewis Randa, director of the Peace Abbey in Sherborn, honors Sikh leader Yogi Bhanjan Friday night with the Courage of Conscience Award.

Sikh leader honored for mission of peace

Center in Sherborn issues 52nd award

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SHERBORN — His name may not sound familiar, but for 20 million people around the world, Yogi Bhanjan represents peace.

The leader of the Sikh religion in the Western hemisphere, Bhanjan came to America in 1969 for a three-day visit. Twenty-six years later, his three-day peace mission remains unfinished. Through his teachings, Bhanjan has changed the lives of thousands of Americans.

Bhanjan was honored Friday night as the 52nd recipient of the Peace Abbey Courage of Conscience Award.

He said he merely teaches others to raise their own spirit because "a man without peace is not a man complete."

"When I first came to the U.S. in 1969 for a short visit, I saw all the young people getting high on drugs. It was painful to see, so I decided to stay and take the challenge," Bhanjan said. "Peace is difficult to understand. It is mental. You must first have peace of the mind, then of the self and then of the spirit."

In a ceremony before the award presentation, Bhanjan took the seat at the head of the table, a seat occupied by several of history's most influential peace leaders. There, surrounded by his guests clad in white turbans and robes, a brass bowl of water was passed around the table in which each seated guest dipped their fingers to share the healing oils of their hands.

Abbey Director Lewis Randa and Ekongkar Singh Khalsa, a student of Bhanjan and Sikh resident in Millis, presented the award.

"At a time when Robert Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King were laid to rest, when men were dying in Vietnam and scores of America's youth were turning to drugs, Yogi came to this country. He picked us up, dusted us off and wakened us to a new life," said Randa.

Khalsa praised Bhanjan for his accomplishments as a spiritual teacher who has given more than 10,000 lectures and classes, written dozens of books, and established teaching centers on every continent.

"Most importantly, Yogi has advanced the cause of peace. His message has

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been consistent and clear. He told anyone who listened, 'It is not the life that matters, it is the courage you bring to it.' He inspired millions to live distinct and fearless lives, to leave behind the delusion of drugs and despair for a life of commitment and service," said Khalsa.

Bhanjan is on a tour of U.S. Sikhdom, which followers say number at least 500,000. Wellesley-based Khalsa Consultants, a Wellesley consulting firm operated by Sikhs, coordinated the Yogi's trip to the Boston area.

Bhanjan is regarded as Sikhdom's emissary to the West, says Victor Kazanjian, dean of religious life at Wellesley College. "One of the things he has done is engage as a religious leader in the global human rights political scene," Kazanjian says. "He's been able to be a strong voice for peace and health in all of its understanding."

The monastery-like settings where they seek spiritual fulfillment are typical of many deeply religious people in other parts of the world, Kazanjian says. "We in the West have particular experience of a religious community," he says. Unlike the dispersed congregational setting of Western religious practices, "the Sikh life is centered around a community-like ashram."

Despite his lecture-circuit-like lifestyle, one of Bhanjan's followers insists Sikh is not a proselytizing religion.

"They don't have much of a campaign," says Gurucharan Khalsa, a psychologist who converted to Sikh in 1969 while studying mathematics in Claremont, Calif. "What the Yogi Bhanjan is saying is here are tools for better living. Here's how to live. Sikh is not a history or a set of rules."

The award which was first sculpted 52 years ago for the its first recipient, the Dalai Lama, is a small sculpture of a hand holding a open-winged dove.

He was preceded by esteemed peace champions including Muhammad Ali, Rosa Parks, Maya Angelou, Robert Kennedy, Mother Teresa, Richie Havens, Dr. Benjamin Spock, and the Dalai Lama.