

# Happy 7th Birthday, VITALITY Cincinnati!

*a story of friends doing their part  
to welcome the birth of a new world*

**September 1, 2017**



Our story is quite simple, really . . . a grand vision that has revealed itself day by day, step by step. As Dr. Martin Luther King said, “You don’t have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step.”

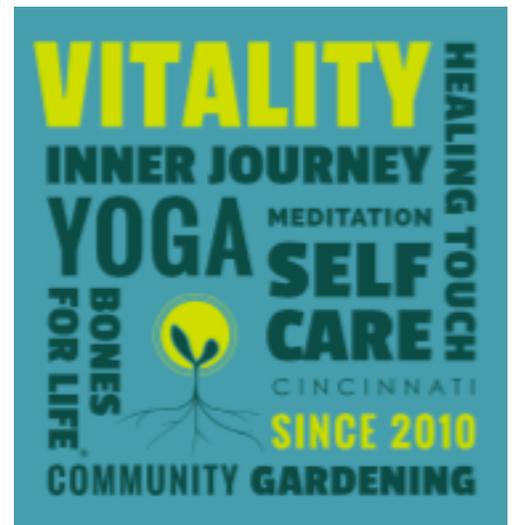
Three of us met at Healing Touch Level 4 in Spring 2008 at Jesuit Spiritual Center at Milford, OH. Micah Richey, Sue Saylor, Brian Shircliff. We did not know each other well, but quickly became intrigued by one another when our group of twenty was asked by Healing Touch instructor Mary Ann Geoffrey to journal about how we hoped to use our Healing Touch studies.

Quite amazingly, without having said a word to each other beforehand, we all journaled nearly the exact same thing . . . “find a way to make Healing Touch and holistic self-care affordable and accessible in Cincinnati.”

Something in us leapt when we heard each other read our writings out loud to the group.

And something began to be born, in that slow, patient, tender way that only good things come to be.

We met on and off for the next two years and dreamed together, wondered together, finished our Healing Touch studies and certifications. And one day, without any real planning together, the air cleared . . . Sue walked in and announced she had just retired early from her nursing career at Shriners Hospital, Brian shared that he had just stepped away from his golf & swimming coaching duties at St. Xavier High School, Micah felt ready for an adventure too. The Universe, God, whatever we call divinity / sacred seemed to be conspiring with us. In the spring of 2010, we began welcoming friends to join us in the conversation and planning. Mary Duennes, Denise & Mike Eck, Rob Thaler, Carol T. Yeazell, Joyce & Tom Choquette, Jack Lennon, Mary Hutten, Penny Costilla, Margee Clark, so many.



Brian drafted a vision of what we might become . . . a retreat center in the country. Self-sustaining in every way. A place of retreat and refuge from the fast-paced city life that seemed to be killing us all slowly. We even scouted out land for such a center, even as far away as California. But something kept drawing us back to Cincinnati. There were seemingly millions of places like this in California, on the West Coast and East Coast. None of them affordable for sure (often \$200/night!), but nothing quite like what we imagined had existed in the Cincinnati area, nothing yet that could welcome all.



We met in one another's homes, welcomed more friends, wondered a bit more. Ever the practical one (a nurse!), Sue suggested maybe we begin with a storefront in Cincinnati. Try out what we wanted to do. Offer Healing Touch and yoga and meditation and journaling for a donation or in exchange for community service.

Shortly after this, a friend noticed that there was a small storefront available in Norwood. On a major road (Montgomery), on the busline, near a university, walkable for so many in one of the most populated areas of Cincinnati . . . just the perfect place. The rent was right, the size a good start . . . but it needed a lot of love.

We all met there — twenty of us — one night in September. Brian cleaned the bathroom. Three times. It was still nasty. There was no power in the whole space. We had a camping lantern in the bathroom. People brought lawn chairs to sit in the circle and discern together if this was indeed the right place. As we did at every gathering, we meditated a few minutes in the quiet before we began any conversation. And soon we all agreed, despite the leaves that were on the floor in the center of the room, despite the hole in the ceiling, despite the state of the bathroom, despite the half-finished kitchen area, despite the basement full of junk, despite the gun and knife stores next door, we all knew that this was the place. We had to adjourn the meeting quickly due to darkness!

We had no money, no status with the State of Ohio, no status with the IRS to be able to raise money as a 501c3 non-profit. We had a lot of work to do to make this dream a reality! Mike Harmon, Steve Hils, and Mike Marrero offered very helpful legal advice.

Brian took a one year leave of absence from teaching religion at St. Xavier High School, and used this time to begin drafting the 100 pages required by the IRS and the State to become an entity. He loaned the money needed for renovation, hoping to get it back once we could officially raise money. While taking a theology class at Xavier University with Dr. Arthur Dewey (the best class he'd ever taken...“Paul & Rome”...a class which inspired much of what we were discussing at VITALITY about equal relationship and small communities making change within grand empires, a conversation that was growing in Cincinnati thanks to Dr. Walter Brueggemann's lectures), Brian met a number of Xavier students who wanted to get involved at VITALITY. Austin Muller, Chris Place, Graham Wesley, many more. With a dedicated group of volunteers — Allie Maggini, Sue Newman, Charlotte Profitt, Jodi Shircliff, Ginny Zimmerman, and some of our founders — we offered our first Healing Touch and yoga classes on Xavier's campus. Students, faculty/staff, parishioners, neighbors were amazed at what was possible through simple self-care practices, slowing down and relaxing together.

We needed a logo, and all of us came up with some great ideas, but none of them quite captured what we were about. Carol T. Yeazell visited her daughter Julie Lucas in Portland, OR and talked about VITALITY and what we wanted to become. In the time it took for Carol to board the plane and fly back to Cincinnati, Julie had sent designs for logo possibilities that included a little seed growing and surrounded by light. In unison, we all agreed this was perfect.



We began dealing with some of the issues with renovating the space that the landlord had agreed to let us work with rent-free as we made it livable. Dave Buten, a friend of Brian's from high school, and Austin Muller built a protective wall around the stairs to the basement.



Margee Clark, Brian's Healing Touch mentor, sent her son Marty of Creative Tile Concepts to renovate the bathroom. Marty usually renovates bathrooms in Cincinnati mansions. He collected excellent materials from the Habitat for Humanity Re-Store and crafted an amazing, elegant bathroom space. Margee generously paid for the full bathroom renovation!

Denise Eck donated her time and design-expertise helping us pick out paint colors and even painted the bathroom. Later, she and Mike helped stain the cubbies that would be built to create a space between the studio and the welcome area.

On a November night just before Thanksgiving, Lee Kindig, Austin Muller, Chris Place, and Brian began painting the walls with environmentally-friendly paint discounted by Danny Korman of Park + Vine. Allie Maggini called and wanted her husband George to come up and get involved. We were blaring music, eating pizza, and doing our best to paint these high walls, and George jumped right in with us. When he discovered we needed better tools to make some improvements that night, he drove home and quipped to his wife, "Alice, that space needs more than paint!" He appointed himself the foreman and drew in his Habitat for Humanity friends to help out during their off-season . . . Dan Bruewer, Hank Burwinkel, Jim Ollier, so many. In addition to many friends they drafted to help, we are so incredibly grateful to them for working nearly every day for months!!!

On December 3, we received word from the IRS that our application was approved — on St. Francis Xavier's feast day! We began soliciting donations from friends immediately.

Just when we needed a new floor, a friend donated \$1800 for a cork floor!

Just when we needed a new sign on the building, two friends donated \$1500 for the sign!

In January 2011, after many final touches in the final hours, we had a soft-opening party and welcomed many friends for an Open House. We began the first programs the next day. We thought every class and opportunity would "sell out" but found that not everyone was interested in who we were and what we were about — at least not at first. Many people — even some of our friends — thought we were crazy, that self-care didn't really matter, at least not as Healing Touch and yoga and meditation and journaling were concerned. And yet people who did join us were getting such huge benefits at our programs! We realized that what we were beginning to offer was a huge shift in the culture of fast lives and little reflection.



We continued steadily, realizing that we were being called and drawn to all we were offering. Donations rolled in from many friends, and Brian was reimbursed every penny that he lent for the

renovation of the space. In addition to the yoga classes and Healing Touch sessions that were offered, Penny Costilla offered a weekly meditation and journaling session we called Inner Journey.

On a spring evening we agreed to meet to organize our first Yoga/Healing Touch Internship later that year, many incredible ideas were discussed and a rainbow greeted us all on our way out.

Michael Delaney, St. Xavier grad and then a student at Xavier University, designed our first website from scratch — no small task!

We offered our first Healing Touch Level 1 class that Spring of 2011 — 20 people! Mary Duennes taught the class. We broke even on the class, even with scholarships offered for a number of people. The class was very much like all of VITALITY's programs . . . such diversity of ages, from college students to grandparents, people from all walks of life.



In the Fall of 2011, with another rainbow on the first day, we welcomed our first Yoga/Healing Touch Internship for \$100 per participant. In exchange for this opportunity that would ordinarily cost \$2000+, each intern was asked to offer 200 hours of yoga & Healing Touch to neighbors, both at our center and in their own circles of life. (In later internships, the give-back became 100 hours of yoga/

Healing Touch and 100 hours of assisting in local community gardens.) One of the most learned yoga teachers in Cincinnati, Becky Morrissey, assisted with that first internship and has helped us ever since. The eight-month internship culminated in a practicum where interns taught a series of ten classes in places where yoga was either not affordable or never offered. Some of the interns from that first internship still teach at those sites!

And now, seven years since our founding as VITALITY, seven years since we sat in that circle in the once-dingy and unlit space at 3925 Montgomery Rd, seven years since we named ourselves VITALITY and continue to celebrate a beautifully welcoming space, “home” for so many . . .

we have hosted eight Yoga/Healing Touch Internships (87 graduates!) and will graduate our ninth internship-class in October 2017,

Brian & VITALITY-grad Cynthia Bedell have been hired as Program Directors, in addition to so many great people who assist with offering their talents at our retreats and workshops . . . Gillian Ahlgren, Cynthia Allen, VITALITY-grad Davi Brown, VITALITY-grad Sherry Joy Clower, Penny Costilla, Charlette Lev Gordon, Lynn Placek, Mary Sinclair, Dan Snyder, Patrick Welage, Graham Wesley, including a monthly Breath Series with Mary Schoen, including so many artists and poets and writers and musicians at our fundraisers, and many more friends who share their talents with us,

we have greatly changed the yoga offerings to be more accessible for people of all ages & lifestyles by hosting a chair yoga class and classes we have even dubbed “Six Poses & a Nap” or Gentle Yoga,

we added Healing Touch Levels 2 & 3 classes and host 3-5 Healing Touch classes a year,

a dedicated crew of VITALITY-grads — Sandra Waits, Peg Conway, & Helen Buswinka — have offered Healing Touch at Bond Hill Food Pantry twice a month for the past 2.5 years,

we added Movement Intelligence / Bones for Life & Feldenkrais Method which have both greatly shaped our yoga offerings through their much more gentle and slow movements that re-shape our brains and our whole selves, something that has been written about much in the *New York Times* bestseller *The Brain’s Way of Healing: Remarkable Discoveries and Recoveries from the Frontiers of Neuroplasticity* by Norman Doidge, M.D. (2015), a book which has inspired our own writing at VITALITY,

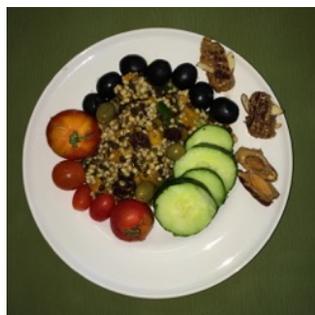


we offered our first full-price 300-hour capstone Yoga & Movement Intelligence training and then our first Movement Intelligence training on its own and look forward to our second one in October 2017,

we have been even more involved with the urban gardens of Walnut Hills and all over Cincinnati & Northern Kentucky and two of our founders, Denise & Mike Eck, left careers to found Rooted in Food to continue growing the local, sustainable food movement, especially in Cincinnati food deserts,

Board members have come and gone and offered their gifts and time, a group of Advisory Friends has been drafted to help us grow, and VITALITY-grad Kevin Laskowski and Richard Bollman, S.J., have made important contributions to our growth recently, adding on to Mike Eck’s Masters Auction,

we received substantial grants from Interact for Health (2), an anonymous family foundation (2), the Conway Foundation, Deaconess Associations, and the Farmer Family Foundation and cash donations that have exceeded \$220,000 between 2010 and 2016, not to mention the many in-kind donations to furnish our center and to supply beautiful items/experiences for our online auctions,



we have published professionally two books — *A New Setting of Ignatius’ Spiritual Exercises* (2015) & *Sweet Lady J: Mother, Muse, & Root of Nearly Everything* (2017) — as ways to help us spread the good news of holistic self-care and raise money for VITALITY, and a third and a fourth book are in the works, and all of those books are available for a donation at our center and online through Amazon,

people who heard about VITALITY three or five years ago and were intrigued but scared or busy or unsure have finally walked through our door and found themselves among friends immediately — friends who talk about moving and



breathing and resting and reflecting together in terms and ways of speaking that make sense to anyone and everyone,

well over 7000 people have participated in VITALITY's programs,

VITALITY Yoga/Healing Touch graduates Cynthia Bedell & Kevin Laskowski have offered Yoga for Women and Yoga for Men classes to help people feel more comfortable in these great practices of yoga,

and more graduates continue to teach all over Cincinnati, Northern Kentucky and the world as they take what they discovered within themselves at VITALITY and shared it. Some have founded studios — ECONsciously by Crystal Judge & The Flying Cat by Julia Martin, a handful of graduates teach yoga/meditation as their full-time job, and many share yoga as part-time / paid opportunities or volunteer their time teaching yoga/meditation and sharing Healing Touch sessions with neighbors,

and the health statistics of Greater Cincinnati are improving since VITALITY began in 2010, and we know that we have had some positive impact in that way, especially in communities where we have focused our efforts: Avondale, Bond Hill, Norwood, Walnut Hills, and the surrounding city-center neighborhoods. Life can indeed be different, easier, full of more joy and laughter and healing, especially when we join one another in the VITALITY circle and share our gifts, our ideas, our warmth, our delicious & locally-grown food, our voices, ourselves.

Grants have helped make all of this happen, a \$1000 check every now and then has been important, generous people giving and bidding through our auctions, and yet it's the small donations that seemed to have mattered the most. A handful of change or \$10 for a class, \$10 - \$50 for an individual Movement Intelligence or Healing Touch session, \$100 - \$200 from local businesses that hire VITALITY to share self-care & stress-relief with their employees, donations of \$15 - \$20 for our VITALITY books, and especially the ever-growing list of friends who donate to VITALITY because they know what is possible with their \$25 or \$100 or \$500 or more when people learn together and heal together and then share their talents in new circles all over Cincinnati and the world.

As we embark on our 8th year of programming, we look forward to the opportunity to raise \$100,000 to carry us forward and to continue watching our graduates transform Cincinnati, Northern Kentucky, and the world. We are excited about the holistic self-care programs that continue to expand at our center, local businesses, and organizations. We look forward to our world growing as we welcome new friends near and far, even our first national speaker with Dr. William Bengston in Spring 2018. We anticipate a great awakening in our world, and look forward to what might be born through us, as we move gently, rest easily, grow and harvest food on this beautiful earth, and live together in joy with all life has to offer, no matter the challenges in the past or the uncertainties of our world's future.



***Through positive relationships where we all are invited to share our gifts, amazing possibilities are being born!***

