

Dieter and Rosemary Jesper build Camp KOHOE - Vast nature retreat in Michigan

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After more than two decades, the long-awaited dream of one Unificationist family to build a vast nature retreat for their community has finally come true. On August 10, Dieter and Rosemary Jesper purchased a sprawling 150-acre property in Watervliet, a sleepy rural town in southern Michigan where they plan to host regional and national retreats, camps, and workshops for the Unificationist community.

"The first time we stepped onto the property my wife said, 'There is an incredible spirit here; it's so beautiful and open and surrounded by 2.5 miles of river,'" said Dieter. "There are miles of trails all around so you can go walking for hours and meditate by the river. This is really the place that I envisioned when I had the inspiration to build a community workshop site 21 years ago in Chung Pyung, South Korea, even though I didn't have the resources to do it."



The serene property alongside the Paw Paw River was once a tennis camp in the 1970s and 80s. It boasts several amenities including two houses, a cabin, a showroom house with floor-to-ceiling windows, an in-ground swimming pool, two fish ponds, and multiple tennis and basketball courts.

"Arthur Ashe was a tennis trainer here," said Dieter. "He was the first black tennis player to win at Wimbledon."

The historic grounds, to be renamed Camp KOHOE (Kingdom of Heaven on Earth), also offer a plethora of possibilities.

"There are clear fields that can easily be used for all kinds of sports," said Nina Oliveira, the Jespers' daughter and the campsite liaison. "There is kayaking and canoeing available on the river and a lot of space to develop this place."

The property's four houses can hold up to 40 people, but the Jespers hope to expand with more buildings to eventually host as many as 120 guests for future youth camps, couples' and marriage retreats, and

Divine Principle workshops, among other programs. The Divine Principle is the core teachings of the Unification movement.



"My family got excited just walking on the property and thinking of all the people who can gather here," said Nina, who is a member of the local young adult retreat planning team. "There are so many ways to interact with nature here. I have an artist retreat in the works for people who can receive guidance on how to connect their work and talent with God and a higher purpose, and also bring joy to people through it."

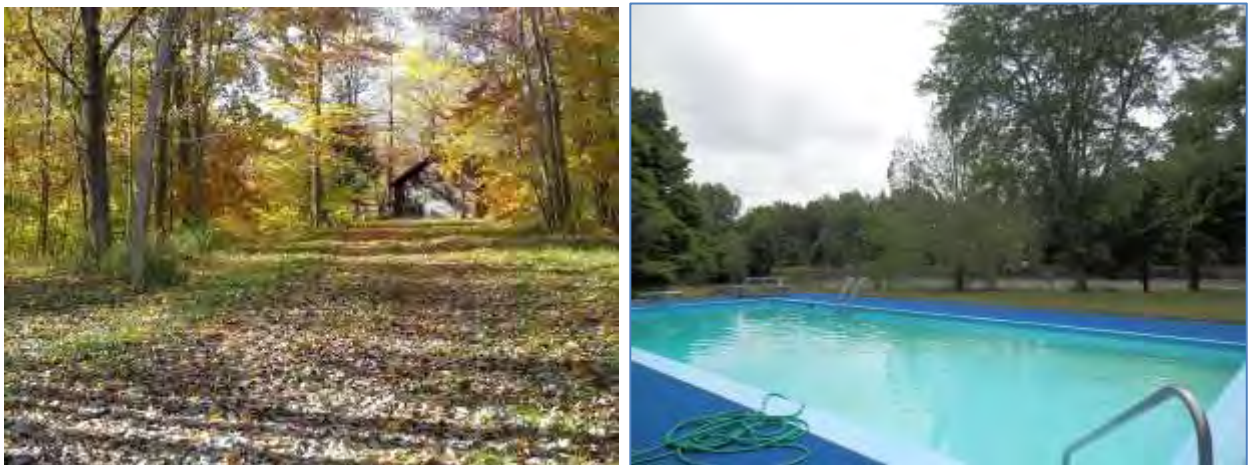
With planning underway, the Jesper family anticipates three to five years of renovations that will include a new pavilion, lecture hall, dining hall, bathhouses, and even a few yurts -- portable, round Mongolian tents.

It's a huge upgrade from the 10-acre property nearby where the family previously held Camp KOHOE since 1999.

"I really felt God wanted me to make a workshop site for my community to get kids out in nature," said Dieter. "For 21 years KOHOE was home to our community for local camps, but the old property was too small for regional workshops and a fence built on the nextdoor property restricted our growth."

This spurred the family's two-year hunt for a new, bigger property in the surrounding area.

"KOHOE is gorgeous but it was never the immersion in nature that my father wanted," said Nina. "I grew up playing on the grounds and nature has always been a part of my life, bringing calmness to it. Nature is one of the greatest ways to see and feel God's love."



The family's continued search efforts eventually paid off in a big way, with a sharp price cut for the recently purchased land. "My father never gave up on his dream," said Nina.

"I thought maybe I'm too old to take this on," added Dieter with a chuckle. "But I remember Rev. Sun Myung Moon said, 'You are either growing, or you are dying,' so I realized there is no retiring."

"Staying the course is the secret to any success," he said. "Nothing is overnight; success is 10, 20, 30 years in the making. We don't need to know how to move forward in success, we just have to keep moving and the how will present itself. All of this was possible because of the love, prayers, and support of our communities."

The Jesper family held a special dedication ceremony for the new Camp KOHOE on August 29. They hope to open the grounds by October but said this depends on the pandemic. The new property was funded through their AirBnB business and renting out the former Camp KOHOE property.