



Photo by Christopher Huber

Gaur Kumar picks out jewelry to place on a deity July 18 at the Vedic Cultural Center. He works full time at Microsoft but volunteers as a priest, teacher and cook, he said.

Volunteers make Vedic center a well-oiled machine

By Christopher Huber

As the lights come on at the Vedic Cultural Center the morning of July 18, about a dozen people buzzed around the large ground-floor kitchen and behind the elegant red and gold curtain that veils the altar.

Except for the muffled sporadic dings and clangs coming from the kitchen and the soft voice of the yoga instructor explaining a pose, the entire place was tranquil and silent as they prepared for the day's services.

Like at the area churches, more worshipers come to the Hare Krishna temple on Sundays. The facility, like the others, is a community outpost, according to those who run it. But with no paid staff, the center relies completely on volunteer help to run its daily worship services, provide free meals and conduct the cultural, language, yoga, math and other classes offered throughout the week. The center is open 5:30 a.m. to 9 p.m. every day, said Nanda Suta Das, the center's director.

"One person cannot do everything," Suta Das said. "It's a community effort."

Among some of the more involved duties various volunteers have is dressing the deities, figures that represent various manifestations of Krishna throughout his life. Each morning, a small group of people — each volunteer is assigned a day of the week to help out — spends more than an hour dressing each deity, outfitting them with ornate jewels and jewelry and decorating the altar with flower garlands. Much of the clothing and jewelry was imported from India, Suta Das said. And some of the women at the center made the pieces themselves, in the Sammamish area.

"There is a spiritual meaning behind everything," he said about the importance of serving.

After each day's worship is over volunteers, and live-in caretaker Bhu Dayal, take down the garlands and hang up the fancy garments to prepare the deities for the next day.

The Vedic Cultural Center prides itself on the plethora of class offerings for all ages. Numerous adults volunteer to teach courses like math, Hindi and Sanskrit languages, Bhakti yoga, dance and arts and crafts — they even have a children's

school principal.

"The school never stops," said Vraja Bhakti, the school's principal.

But everyone has a day job, volunteers said.

One of the goals, said Bhakti, is to immerse youth in American culture but help them stay connected with their roots.

"The idea is they are never away from their Vedic culture," she said. It also promotes community and acceptance. "Every kid becomes friends (with someone)."

During the summer, volunteers run a kids camp, where they make jewelry and learn about the Vedic culture.

"We want them (to be) well rounded," Suta Das said.

The Sammamish center is one of the largest in the state, Suta Das said, serving members from all over the Eastside. Volunteers work in all aspects of operations at the center, and sometimes they use their own equipment to help with maintenance, for example. It's all with the bigger picture in mind.

"When we all work together to serve the lord better, in reality we

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Photo by Christopher Huber

Ekta Gupta washes the baby Krishna before worshipers arrive July 18 at the Vedic Cultural Center in Sammamish.

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are serving ourselves better," Suta Das said. "We want people to

come together and do things together."

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