

Zen Group Offers Quiet Refuge in Downtown Middlebury



Cornwall-Based **Bread Loaf Mountain Zen Community**, led by Joshin Byrnes, has signed a two-and-a-half-year lease for 48 Merchants Row in downtown Middlebury, a spot that will host a community gathering spot — appropriately called “Gather.” | *Independent Photo: Steve James*

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By John Flowers

MIDDLEBURY — Downtown Middlebury has several parks and a bandstand in which to spend a contemplative moment or two.

It will soon add a living room.

Valentine’s Day (Feb. 14) is the tentative launch date for “Gather,” a 1,400-square-foot space at 48 Merchants Row in which folks will be able to congregate, enjoy food, chat with neighbors, and benefit from entertaining and therapeutic programming — all for free.

It’s a project of the Cornwall-based Bread Loaf Mountain Zen Community, which recently signed a 2.5-year lease for what was once home to the Bourdon Insurance Agency.

“Our goal here is to create a space where people can come together as neighbors and get to know one another. It’s a space where hopefully the community can mix,” said Joshin Byrnes, leader of the Zen community, which bills itself as a “welcoming place to learn about

and practice meditation, share Buddhist teachings, and to create relationships that are mindful, caring and responsive to the unmet needs of others,” according to its website.

“We’re also trying to address the epidemic of loneliness that’s in our communities,” Byrnes added. “Where do people go when they’re feeling alone and they really want to talk to someone or be in the company of others?”

Byrnes stressed Gather will be a secular operation; no one who uses it will be asked to join Bread Loaf Mountain Zen Community (BLMZC) or partake in its programming.

People can just drop by to rest, use the restroom and/or laundry facilities, and have a cup of tea, coffee or a snack. There will be craft days, game nights, book groups, celebrations of life, birthday gatherings, recovery and wellness meetings, and community acupuncture. Coffee, tea, snacks, restroom, meeting room, shower and laundry will be available to all, according to organizers.

The building will include space for anyone of any faith or mindset who’d like to quietly reflect. For example, a memorial service is in the works for former guests of the nearby Charter House Emergency Shelter who have died during the past year.

“These are lives that have not been appropriately celebrated, so we’ll be working with the Charter House on that,” Byrnes said.

Every Sunday at 9 a.m., Gather will host sessions for people to discuss anything that’s important to them, with coffee afterwards.

Each day Gather is open, there’ll be a guided meditation session for anyone who wants to participate, according to Byrnes. A recovery and wellness group will meet at the space on Fridays at 2 p.m.

“Some nonprofits have already started talking to us about using the space for some things they’re doing,” he said.

Everything offered at the building will be free, Byrnes stressed. He and his colleagues reasoned that taking money out of the equation would be a great equalizer, ensuring anyone could come to Gather regardless of socioeconomic status.

“That’s a very important value for us,” he said. “We want everyone feel like they can access the space.”

As a nonprofit, how is BLMZC able to afford the rent, maintenance and utilities for Gather while not collecting any fees for those who use it?

The answer is donations. Around 1,300 people are on Bread Loaf Mountain Zen Community’s worldwide newsletter email list. A few hundred of those 1,300 are locals, according to Byrnes.

“We put it out to our extended network and had a very positive and generous response,” Byrnes said.

Now five years old, BLMZC has cultivated a history of generosity and community outreach.

The *Independent* published a story last July about the group’s food truck, called StreetGreens, which during the warmer months served up free fresh food to passersby at the Ilsley Library, the Charter House shelter and other Middlebury-area locations.



Joshin Byrnes, Leader of the Bread Loaf Mountain Zen Community, shows off “Gather,” the 1,400-square-foot space at 48 Merchants Row that will be available — free of charge — for meetings, special events, refreshments, restrooms, laundry and many other uses. Independent photo/Steve James

BRICKS-AND-MORTAR

But Bread Loaf Mountain Zen Community has long desired a bricks-and-mortar presence in downtown Middlebury. The group finally saw its chance to establish a grounded gathering spot after work concluded last year on the downtown Middlebury rail tunnel. The Vermont Agency of Transportation had been using 48 Merchants Row as a temporary office space

during construction and pulled up stakes when the project ended. The building was put up for sale, and Jennifer Pyle and Ben Nye bought it.

“We noticed the storefront was empty and approached them with the idea of creating a community living room,” Byrnes said. “They loved this idea and have been wonderful to work with.”

Byrnes said Pyle and Nye deserve credit for not only embracing BLMZC’s proposed use, but for also extending the group a reasonable rent and sharing in major renovation of the structure to make it more user-friendly. The fixes, among other things, involved shoring up the building foundation, replacing the flooring, upgrading the electrical system, and installing new windows and walls.

“It was a major overhaul, almost down to the studs,” Byrnes said.

The refurbished space now includes a generous entrance area, a large living room, two offices for private conversations/meetings, and a handicap-accessible restroom and shower.

“We’re not anticipating very large crowds,” Byrnes said. “We do anticipate people stopping in for a little while, then heading out after a bit.”

Bread Loaf Mountain Zen Community members will manage and supervise the space, noted Byrnes, who’s also reaching out to the community for volunteers who’d like to help out.

BLMZC is looking for ideas on ground rules and scheduling for the Gather space.

“We’re just starting out, and we’re trying to figure that out,” Byrnes said. “Our model here is to see who knocks on the door and then for us to respond in a way that’s helpful and useful for them. We want to hear how the community wants to use this space.”

Plans call for Gather to be open Wednesday-Saturday, 11 a.m.-4:30 p.m., and Sunday, 9-11 a.m. On the first day of operations next Tuesday, Gather will hold an open house from 1 to 4 p.m. Check out gatheronthegreen.org for more details. To volunteer or donate, contact breadloafmountainzen.org.

Karen Duguay is executive director of the Better Middlebury Partnership. She believes Gather can be an asset to the downtown.

“Spaces dedicated to community gathering are very important for downtowns; it’s how we strengthen our connections to one another as a community and our connections to our downtown as a social and economic hub,” she said. “We’re thrilled to learn of another opportunity for community gathering and it sounds as though the Bread Loaf Mountain Zen Community is working to create a warm, inviting space for community members and visitors alike. We look forward to stopping in.”

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