



An Interview with Ira Wallace

Ira Wallace is a force. Most everyone who's been through the doors of Twin Oaks Community in Louisa, Virginia over the last three decades—and this numbers in the thousands—knows Ira. Many of us who have known her over the years wonder how it is that she seems to have her hand in everything: to have either started or helped maintain so many pieces of importance in the communities movement.

Another significant point is that Ira Wallace was born in 1948. She grew up in the South in the '50s and '60s—in a world full of race, class, gender, and sexual oppressions.

Audre Lorde famously said, “Let me tell you first about what it was like being a Black woman poet in the '60s... It meant being invisible. It meant being really invisible. It meant being doubly invisible as a Black feminist woman.”

Yet Ira has created a world where she's become far from invisible.

Ira Wallace lives at both Twin Oaks and Acorn Community as a dual member. She was central in restarting the Twin Oaks Communities Conference (after a 10 year dormancy), established Acorn Community, developed a thriving craft business that kept Acorn alive in the early years, and co-manages Southern Exposure Seed Exchange, which offers 700+ varieties of

non-GMO, open pollinated, and organic seeds. In November 2011 Southern Exposure was awarded Sustainable Institution of the Year by the Carolina Farm Stewardship Association (CFSA) and named one of the Top 15 Vegetable Seed Companies by *Mother Earth News*.

These days Ira's force is spread far and wide, just like her seeds. Ira blogs about gardening in the Southeast, writes for *Mother Earth News*, contributes to the Southern SARE (Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program)-sponsored Saving Our Seeds Project, presents throughout the country at sustainable agriculture events, serves on the board of the Organic Seed Alliance, and is the organizer of the Heritage Harvest Festival at Monticello, a fun, family-friendly event featuring an old-timey seed swap, local food, and hands-on workshops. The Festival has become an important regional gathering, growing to over 4,400 attendees in 2011.

Ira is also writing her first book, which will be available from Timber Press by early 2014. The working title is *Timber Press Guide to Vegetable Gardening in the Southeast*. Her goal is nothing less than the creation of sustainable, regional food systems

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built on cooperative self-reliance that provide safe, healthy food for everyone—starting with home and community gardens.

I caught up with her in 2010 and at a rare moment in the Acorn kitchen, pulled out a tape recorder and asked her about her life. You can tell just by looking at her that there's wisdom on those bones. Here's what she had to say.

How long have you lived in community?

My entire adult life. And I'm now 62. (That was nearly three years ago. Ira turns 65 in 2013.)

ALOE COMMUNE

I came to a Twin Oaks conference in the early '70s. My daughter was four at the time and Twin Oaks didn't accept children. So a group of us with kids got together, met over a few months, and decided to move to together to North Carolina to start a commune. We bought 250 acres near Chapel Hill and called it Aloe Community.

We were young and so *gung-ho!* that it was sort of hard to live with us. A couple of us had jobs at the University but we'd get up and milk the cows before we went to work, come home and milk the cows, look after the kids, and all the other stuff of life. We had it in our mind that we wanted to pay off all our debt in five years, which was probably the death of the commune. It just meant work, work, work. People who weren't high energy had a hard time there.

We were also experimenting with some radical social ideas not only in alternatives to traditional relationships but also in the idea that people should get to know each person equally. We would have these sleepover dates (not necessarily to have sex) so we'd have one on one time with everyone. Sometimes it was just a little much. So we paid off our debt and more or less split up at the same time.

At the time we split up we owed maybe \$25,000 to a couple of parents. We thought we might find another group who wanted to start a community and we'd sell them the land for the amount of money we still owed. We put it out and also tried to get the Federation of Egalitarian Communities to help us but no one would do it because they were sure it was a fake deal—too good to be true. We actually tried for four years and in the end we divided the land and sold it off to various homesteaders. It was sad but we got tired of paying the taxes.

After I left Aloe I spent a year on kibbutz.

DANDELION

I still had a young child so Twin Oaks wasn't yet an option, so we moved next to a community called Dandelion in Canada and lived there for almost five years. My daughter and I started having immigration issues and the only way to solve them would have been to marry a Canadian and we decided to come back to the States.

I was planning to go to nursing school so we went to Florida and lived just the two of us for nine months or so. Then came the summer and Raphy, my daughter, was out of school. We decided to visit Twin Oaks and have a good time. We did and everyone liked us. And even though Twin Oaks is funny about kids they invited us to be in the visitor group and apply for membership. And so we went to live there. During that time though Twin Oaks had decided to send the bulk of the younger children to private school, which was great except that Raphy was five years older than the other kids. Because of the private school there was no money for extracurricular or after-school activities. This was pretty isolating and hard on her, given the fact that

she was a young teenager. She decided at that point to live with her dad in Florida.

TWIN OAKS AND ACORN

I lived at Twin Oaks starting in 1984. The Women's Gathering just started when I was a visitor and I worked on that for 10 years or so. I started Acorn Community in 1993. We started Acorn because Twin Oaks was full. So full, in fact, that the waiting list was over a year long.

A few of us put our heads together—Kat Kinkade, who started Twin Oaks, my partner Gordon Sproule, and I—and we wrote people who seemed interested, then we figured out what needed to happen, and put a plan together. We started out by saying “We've got a new idea. We can start a new commune. And we want Twin Oaks to lend a quarter million dollars to get us going.” And son-of-a-gun, within the course of a year, everyone thought it was a reasonable idea. And it did become reasonable because we slogged away at all of the concerns until it was clear.

In a similar way I restarted the Communities Conference at Twin Oaks. Twin Oaks is very based on labor credits, so I said, “Can I do this thing if I don't take any labor credits and if I make it pay for itself?” Some people said OK. So now people take labor credits to organize it and it pays for itself.

What keeps you in community?

I don't have much of a biological family so I guess it's become my family. And as long as I can remember I've had a desire to make some difference in the world. But the world is one great, big, hard place to make a difference. Community is a small enough chunk that you can make a difference. And it also is a good place from which you can, from time to time, try to make a difference in some bigger subset of the world.

I think of it as not perfect but more in alignment with my values than when I was married and trying to have a house

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and do all those things. So much time was taken up with providing for myself and my family that there wasn't much time for other things.

What values does community meet for you?

1. RACE: It's easier to be a black person in community than in the larger world. There are intersections of race and class that make this style of living less likely for most people of color, but once here, race is not a big deal.

For example, I used to dread going to job interviews. I'm well spoken enough so that the person wouldn't know I was black until they met me. The person would be enthusiastic on the phone and I never knew how they were going to be once they saw me. It's a relief not having to deal with that kind of stuff.

2. FEMINISM: When I first lived in community, I was fired up about feminism. Now I'm not as fired up because I'm used to things that used to be a big problem not being a problem in my day-to-day life. Not until some crazy visitor comes along who reminds me how bad it can be.

3. ECONOMICS: I am interested in ideas of economic justice and this particular style of income sharing community is trying to figure out how to achieve that. At the very least, community plays with those ideas.

4. ENVIRONMENT: You have a small environmental footprint just by living together and sharing stuff too.

Can you say more about feminism and how it informed your choices?

It seemed at the time to bump me all the time in these everyday kinds of ways.

When I first started Aloe Community, we moved to Chapel Hill and I applied for various teaching jobs. We were just starting and needed the income. It was summer so I applied for a summer grounds job and they just didn't even consider me. They told me they didn't have any position, and then this guy that I happened to know got hired the next day. I was so mad. I wrote a letter to these people calling them racist and sexist (in a nice way). I was as qualified as this person and I had experience using the equipment they had talked about. I told them that I was going to talk to the equal opportunity people about it. They contacted me and invited me back for another interview almost immediately. But just in general it was this kind of thing. You go in and they look at you and decide that you can't do something. It's bad enough dealing with race and then having gender stacked on it—very unpleasant.

Throughout my life I did a lot of things I really didn't like doing. I spent a good part of my late teens and 20s getting under my car and fixing it, even though I didn't like it, because it just made me so mad that somebody thought I couldn't do stuff. Or worse, people would try to rip you off because you were a woman.

I grew up in a neighborhood with a fair amount of physical abuse of women by men. People didn't bother about it. They'd say, "That's her husband. You shouldn't interfere with it. He didn't really hurt her." It was unbelievable.

All of that has informed my living in community. People weren't even talking about trying to be different. But when I would visit Twin Oaks there were strong equal opportunity policies in place. It just seemed like a brave new world.

Do you have a spiritual practice?

I grew up Catholic and liberation theology got me into feminism and social activ-

ism. When my favorite priest ran off with the organist I said, "I don't know if I can do this." It was sort of the end of my strong spiritual moments.

Do you feel like you are missing something from living this lifestyle?

For me personally, not so much. I'm energetic and a networker so living here and having not so much money doesn't keep me from doing things that I want to do. For some other people who can't figure how to do what they want to do without spending money, sometimes it's difficult for them.

One thing I think might be better is to be able to cook what I want if I lived by myself. From time to time I try to lose weight and it's a hassle because I can't get other people to cook what I want.

What's your relationship to the media? Do you follow national or regional politics? Or pop-culture entertainment?

I am on the board of the Organic Seed Alliance and we have lawsuits against Monsanto going so I follow it avidly. Being involved with Southern Exposure Seed Exchange, I've started to pay more attention to what people say about seeds. With national media and the first election, I got excited about Obama and read everything. Now, not so much. I'm vaguely informed.

There is a lot of turnover in community. How does that work for you?

Sometimes I think the fact that I don't get that attached to people is a good thing. And at the same time the people I really like and sometimes haven't seen for five years, we can just take up where we left off. I guess it suits me.

Do you feel you have enough privacy?

I never grew up with privacy. We had this crazy house that my grandfather had

built and you had to walk through someone else's room to get somewhere. There were always cousins, aunts, and grandparents staying for a while. So growing up in a household with a lot of people in a small space didn't seem strange to me.

What do you love and what do you hate about living in community?

I love the opportunity to do a lot of what I'm excited about, which has changed drastically from time to time, for my main work. I think I'm the luckiest person in the world. When we started Southern Exposure Seed Exchange I never got to work in the business. We needed money and I was immersed in the craft business to bring in the money. One day I got to start working in the seed business and it's been real fun. In the past I got to have a market garden, start another commune, teach herb workshops.

Sometimes what I hate is having to listen to someone go on and on about something that I've heard over and over again through the years. Probably every other year for the past 12 years we've had to hash out the dog thing or how clean things should be. It's frustrating when people who just come in that minute say things like "I just got here and I should have equal say on things that are long-term."

What keeps you committed to this life?

It's the people. It's true that you get tired of people leaving. But some great person comes along and you get to work with them. And it's really fun. It's possible to be equal colleagues with people who are in their 20s. I love learning stuff from them, like computer things. It seems that usually people only know others in their age and stage of life groups. Not here. I can play with people's babies and give them back. I like that.

Honoring an Elder

Aside from being a force, both in community and in the world, Ira Wallace is a true elder. Many of us have learned from her over the years and consider her a friend and community ally. The whole movement was shaken in 2011 when Ira was diagnosed with a brain tumor. Luckily Acorn and Twin Oaks are near Charlottesville, home to the University of Virginia (UVA), which boasts an outstanding medical community inclusive of people without health insurance. "I had the best surgeon," Ira said. "He was the guy who took care of Superman (Christopher Reeves) when he was ill. I figured 'If people with lots of money want this dude, he's probably good.'"

Come to find out the tumor was malignant—which can be a near-term death sentence. Thankfully, her Superman surgeon team removed the whole tumor during surgery. In a year of going back every three months for MRI's, she's still free of cancer. Blessedly, her recovery has been amazing. She spoke at length about her new projects for finding seed growers in the Southeast and all sorts of fun she's having.

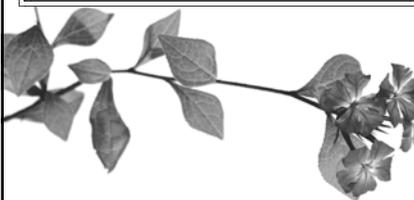
In closing a recent phone call with Ira, I asked her how she felt about this article. "It's sure nice to get recognized as an elder instead of only getting the aching knees."

Well, honor we do. Thanks to Ira and others like her in community who have paved the way for us. We stand firmly on your shoulders. 🐦

Lee Walker Warren has lived in community for 15 years—a year-and-a-half of that with Ira at Acorn Community, back in 2000 and 2001. At that time Lee co-managed Southern Exposure Seed Exchange. Now she is a writer, herbalist, homesteader, and the manager of a cooperative, organic farm at Earthaven Ecovillage. She is the cofounder of Village Terraces Cohousing Neighborhood, a permaculture and agriculture based sub-community within Earthaven.

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