

# Reinventing Islesford's Neighborhood House

Islanders come together to create a new future  
for a well-loved community center

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We were on the road making a documentary called *Driving Home*. Sonja and I had set out from New York in June 2002, hoping to rediscover our country on what was supposed to be a yearlong journey around the lower 48. Little did we know that when we pulled our '86 Buick Century, Mama Blue, into the parking lot of the Seawall Campground at Acadia National Park, our days of traveling were numbered, and that we would soon be moving to a small island off the coast.

But that's what we did just two months after first coming to Maine and paying a chance visit to Little Cranberry Island, known locally as Islesford. Standing in the pottery shop on that foggy August day talking with Marian Baker, Cindy Thomas, David Thomas and Lil Alley, listening to them describe life on the island, something happened. We got caught in the magnetic pull that radiates from certain spots on the earth, and we knew that we were going to spend some time there. In October, we loaded our belongings onto the mailboat with the notion of perhaps wintering in Maine and then returning to our travels. Six and a half years later, our road trip and our film still unfinished, Islesford has become our home.

Why have we stayed? There are lots of reasons to live on a Maine island. We love the way of life, the calm pace, the ocean, the air, the sound of the bell buoy. On a land mass smaller than one square mile there are wetlands, forests, and clear views of the mountains, and on any given day you've got them all to yourself. Bald eagles nest on the island, deer abound, blackberries and irises grow wild, and pink granite covers the beaches. However, while the charms of nature have surely worked their magic on us, something else keeps us connected to Islesford. It's what makes the



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place unique, and what makes it home. It's the amazing community that the island possesses. We knew it that first day and we know it every day we are on the island. We know we are blessed to have found, and to have become part of, such a wonderful group of people.

There's an openness to the Islesford community that gives the place a special feeling. I'd be lying if I said there was none of the wariness with which any small town views newcomers, but by and large, on Islesford it's a warm welcome that greets a strange face. The folks in the pottery shop weren't put off when we mentioned our interest in living on the island; they encouraged us. And over the years, with a combination of curiosity, generosity, and a deep desire to see the population stay strong, others have been similarly encouraged, leading to the growth of a robust, colorful and diverse year-round community. In a population of under 100, you'll find lobstermen and dock workers, caretakers, cleaners, carpenters and contractors, gardeners, cooks and bakers, authors, artists and craftsmen, teachers and students, one librarian, two postal workers, and a trio of town employees; and

in warmer months, when the population swells to over 300, the variety only increases. Each person's life contributes to the life of the island and instills in its character a breadth and depth of experience, enriching the community and inspiring increased openness, so that when your feet hit the town dock on Islesford, you sense the energy of the islanders and feel welcomed by it.

The feeling builds as you walk up the hill past the Congregational Church, and by the time you reach the Islesford Neighborhood House it's palpable. Because of its size, Islesford has one building to do what it would take a half-dozen buildings to do on the mainland, and when you walk inside, you know instantly that the Neighborhood House is it. It's where we saw Danielle McCormick and Emily Thomas graduate from eighth grade that first spring, and where we attended our first Town Meeting. The main hall heard my mother sing an Italian love song—a capella—while Sonja and I danced on our wedding day, and later that same year it heard the stories people told, crying and laughing, to mark the passing of Warren Fernald (a much-loved island elder who made it his business to make strangers feel welcome and to help new residents become established on the island). The building houses our library and our theater; it's where we do yoga and play Ping-Pong; it's the island's kitchen, dining room and living room. In its 96 years, the Neighborhood House has been the scene of countless moments, big and small, in the life of the community and all the people who've passed through its doors.

Island native Ted Spurling and his wife, Jeri, have three daughters. "The Neighborhood House is where Jeri and I had our wedding reception on a cold January day," he said. "It's where I graduated from eighth grade and where all



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*The Big Blue Lobster dancing at the Masque Ball, 2008*



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my girls graduated. I can't imagine it not being there. It really is the center of our community?

I remember my first meeting as a newly minted trustee of the Islesford Neighborhood House Association (INHA), the nonprofit organization responsible for the care and operation of the building. (I'd been roped in during our first summer. Turns out, getting on a committee in a small town suffering from severe volunteer exhaustion is as easy as not saying no.) We were in Frannie Jo Bartlett's kitchen, and Gail Grandgent had brought cookies flavored with rose oil. I recall the rose flavor being very strong, and I also recall being very impressed by the other trustees and the seriousness with which they dis-

cussed the issues on the agenda. Though still not quite sure what I'd gotten myself into, I walked home that day excited to be a part of the board.

Over time I learned that the INHA board is responsible not simply for keeping the walls from falling down, but also for ensuring that the Neighborhood House remains relevant and responsive to the needs of the island. Historically, by listening to neighbors and looking for opportunities to be of service, the board has certainly lived up to its responsibility, always keeping the INH in good condition and altering or adding on to it when necessary. As needs have changed, so has the Neighborhood House, and it has admirably done all that the community has asked of it. But recently, perhaps attributable to the increasing outside pressures on small island populations, islanders are once again looking at the INH and wondering how else it might contribute to the continued viability of the island population.

In my time on the board, the most common suggestion has been to make the building a year-round facility. Here we have this tremendous asset, which is used so well in the summertime, going empty for more than half the year because it isn't insulated. How much stronger is a community that has a warm and comfortable center? Acting on this input, the board voted in the fall of 2007 to form a building subcommittee—Amanda Ravenhill (a former Cranberry Isles Island Institute Fellow), Cory Duggan and me—to explore the idea of winterizing the building and possibly making other improvements at the same time.



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The Islesford Theater Project stages Pierre Marivaux's *Game of Love and Chance* at the Neighborhood House.

We started by simply putting it out there that we were looking for input from the community, and it quickly became clear that our fellow islanders had a lot of ideas about how the Neighborhood House could be improved. For Ann Fernald, who with her husband Warren Fernald raised six children on the island, it represents the future. "What price can we put on the value of our Neighborhood House?" Ann said. "Let us unite the nostalgic past with fresh, energized ideas and inspiration, for our use now as well as for future generations."

To capture those ideas and give community members a forum to communicate directly with one another about the INH, our next step was to organize a community "visioning" in August 2008. We gathered in the main hall, summer and year-round residents alike, old and young, native and transplant, and although most came with strong feelings about the building and what should or should not happen to it, all remained open-minded and participated fully in the process. Looking ahead, five years into the future, we began with a list of questions about what the Neighborhood House of 2013 might be like. Armed with Sharpies and Post-its, as the questions were read we scribbled down whatever answers came to mind, one per Post-it. There were no restrictions—answers could be fully articulated thoughts or single words—and we did this for fifteen minutes (although we could have gone on and on).

When it was time to stop writing, we then took the Post-its, over 300 of them, and stuck them to the walls, working as a group to put them into "clusters" of similar ideas. Next, we took each cluster and distilled the individual ideas into one overarching statement. Finally, putting all the "cluster statements" together, we had the foundation of a





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*The wedding reception for Lindsay Eysnogle and Jason Pickering, held at the Neighborhood House*

community vision for a transformed Neighborhood House.

The vision was expansive. Beyond simply seeing a year-round space, the community saw a main hall big enough to accommodate our otherwise-crowded potluck suppers, wide enough for community dances, and with a high-enough ceiling for winter basketball. Folks saw a larger and better-equipped kitchen, a refurbished entryway and common room, a greater capacity to host cultural events and the potential for energy efficiency and generation.

Ravenhill, a member of the building subcommittee, said the Neighborhood House is the heart of the island, especially in the summer. “I dream of a time that it can mean the same for the winter population,” she said. “If it were insulated and comfortable in the winter it would be used, no doubt, and it would beat like it does in the summer. It would be a place where all of us, regardless of age, could come together and eat, play games, converse and build community. A well-functioning Neighborhood House means a healthy community. A healthy community creates inspired people, and inspired people make the world a better place.”

The INHA board was excited by all of the ideas, and decided to pursue a building renovation project. But how to get from the vision to its realization? Considering the amount of money that would be needed to make the proposed changes, the board authorized the development of a capital campaign in the fall of 2008. Considering the amount of work that would be needed to organize the project, the subcommittee was expanded to include a fourth trustee, Luke Abell, and seven other community members: Cindy Thomas, Denise McCormick, Barb Fernald, Sonja Moser, Caroline Sholl and

Dan and Cynthia Lief. Mindful of the other elements of the community vision—that the history of the Neighborhood House must be respected, that the building should retain its look and feel, that every effort should be made to preserve all that people love about it, and that decisions had to be made with the next 100 years in mind—the newly expanded subcommittee set about developing a plan. Working hand in hand with the community, we will launch our capital campaign at the annual Islesford Fair in the summer of 2009. In the current economic situation, we have our work cut out for us, but we are optimistic about this project, and confident that we will be able to finish it by the spring of 2013, in time for the 100th anniversary of the building’s opening.

We have a ways to go before the community’s vision for a year-round Islesford Neighborhood House is realized, but when this project is complete, I believe we will have done something that will benefit not just the folks living on the island today, but our children and grandchildren too. The experiences we share bind us closer to each other and deepen our sense of place. The more we are able to break bread together, to dance and play together, to simply *be* together, the stronger our community becomes. In the short time that we have lived on the island, the Islesford Neighborhood House has been the scene of some of the best moments of our life together, and when I think about our newborn son Finnegan’s eighth-grade graduation, I know that it will be the scene of many more to come.

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