

# A Vision Manifested

*Footprints of a Dream: the Story of Starrette Farm Retreat*

by Ann Foy Starrette

## Introduction

January 2024, begins our 19th year using our beloved Retreat House at Starrette Farm. The vision for this place and space — well, it wasn't even a vision — it was more like a smoke-filled room with some light wooing me forward. Whatever it was, it was not a clear vision. It wasn't even a form or a shape. At best, it was a formless “presence” that showed up in the middle eighties. I don't remember when or how it came about. I only know there began to be this vague thought lodged in the back of my mind, somewhere way “back there” but never brought forward, never seriously considered, and certainly never spoken aloud — this far-fetched idea of providing people and organizations a sacred space apart to tend their souls, stretch their minds, and free their spirits. I never entertained the slightest notion that I, Ann Starrette, could manifest such a thing.

1. First, I didn't begin to think I had what it took “in here.”
2. Second, the hand I had been dealt, not chosen, through my life circumstances prohibited it.
3. Third, I didn't have the education, the money, the resources, or a husband who would even remotely entertain such an idea.

So, the shape waiting within this seed of possibility within me remained dormant for years.

## Chapter One: In the Meantime

1985 to early 1990s

Possibly — who can say for sure — this seed of possibility was conceived when God and I had a conversation about my needing more than “devotion and dessert.” God politely asked, “What will you do about it?” This led me to ask a neighbor for help to begin what we called “Second Saturday School of Prayer” (1985-1993). My role was opening my home, inviting the people, making the coffee, and standing by the door to welcome them. Mary Lynn's role was to facilitate the group. Our first book was *Disciplines of the Beautiful Woman* by Ann Ortlund. An average of twenty-five women from several denominations came monthly. What joy!

In the meantime, amid all this thirst for more (of what I did not know), and vagueness of vision, I worked with my husband at Enterprise Printing in Mooresville, a business we sold in 2008 after serving the Lake Norman region for 40 years. For a break every day, sometimes more than once a day, I'd go next door to the Quick Stop for a cup of coffee and a friendly exchange with the manager.

One day I casually told her how much I admired her for doing what she loved — traveling. She was always going on fabulous trips. I did wonder how. Her station in life didn't seem like it would be able to provide such adventures.

She told me she loved to travel but never did because it took money she didn't have. Then, one day, the idea came upon her to save every extra “cent” that came her way --- birthday money, Christmas money, coins on the street, rebates, and tax returns, coupled with being very thoughtful of how she spent her money. She said people would be surprised -- even amazed -- at how much money we waste with nothing in return to show for it.

Well, I thought, if she can do that, I can do that.

I started saving every extra cent - managing my money like never before. I did not know what trip I was saving for, but this would help me prepare financially. And, wow, it did add up. When the manager moved on from her Quick Stop position, I started making my own coffee at the print shop and saved an extra \$10 a week, which I'm sure = \$500 a year!

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## Chapter Two: Out of the Blue

1997

Then, one day, out of the blue, my sister came to visit me. It was July 1997. We were in the kitchen, standing at the center island. After some chitchat, she pulled out an envelope from her purse with my name on it. She slid it across the kitchen counter and said: “I want you to use this for nothing but your dream.” Puzzled, I looked at the envelope but didn't say a word. Then it dawned on me that the envelope contained what had to be a small inheritance check after my parent's passing.

I had never told my sister about my formless dream. To this day, it remains a mystery as to how she chose those particular words.

But with her words, a little tiny squiggle burst forth from the seed of potential within. That squiggle began to take root, became established, and grew. The seed of potential went from a vague possibility to a hoped-for reality. To this day, I cannot explain it any other way. I did NOT go searching for this dream. The seed of this dream found me. I took the check for \$33,300 and added it to my “Quick Stop” funds. I saved and saved and saved, mind you, never telling anyone. It became clear that I was not going on a trip “out there” but embarking on a journey “in here.”

## Chapter Three: **After That**

After that, I began spending some time in silence and committing to paper the stirrings of my soul.

However, in the early '90s, I was nudged by something or Someone beyond me to shadow a retreat leader on numerous occasions to learn what books cannot teach you.

In June 1998, I spent a week in CA training with Laurie-Beth Jones, author of *The Path: Creating Your Mission Statement for Work and Life*.

In the Fall of 1998, I enrolled in a 2-year intensive training program on Leading Contemplative Retreats. I began offering retreats at my home, the Chamber of Commerce, and other places.

My church's director of Congregational Care invited me to offer numerous classes on *The Path*.

From there, I was encouraged to create a business offering this 3-day workshop. I went on to offer 20+ weekend workshops, talks, half-day, and more on *The Path* content.

During this period, I read about Lydia's sacred history in Acts 16. She was the first person baptized on European soil, the first to have a house church, and the first businesswoman (seller of purple) recorded. She provided a model of courage, persistence, excellence, and action. Her zest for seamlessly integrating her faith and work, her generosity and hospitality of heart propelled her to invite St Paul, his colleagues, then others into her home to worship and learn. **That is what I wanted to do!** Unable to develop a catchy name for the ministry, I called it THE LYDIA GROUP.

Various groups (churches, organizations, groups) began to invite me to lead retreats, give talks, and facilitate workshops. I opened a checking account under The Lydia Group, LLC, as a holding space for my earnings for my formless dream.

MISSION: I began looking in earnest for a permanent "set apart place" to purchase — providing people and organizations sacred space to tend their souls, stretch their minds, and free their spirits to grow ever closer toward their true purpose and potential — inspiring them to abundantly bring forth their birthright gifts in service to others and glory to God.

In 2000, I enrolled in several spiritual formation courses through Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation in Washington, DC.

Around that same time, I volunteered at a retreat center one day a month for years - usually helping in the kitchen and other chores to learn by watching & listening, noticing how the retreat staff interacted with the guests, and observing the behind-the-scenes mechanics and challenges.

Then in 2001, after my husband's parents passed away, we inherited the family farm (established in 1888). Brothers Ray and Carroll and my husband Tom bought out the other six children and began to civilize what had lain dormant since World War II or as late as 1960. No one knows for sure.

In 2003, the farm deck was built and monthly *Sacred Saturdays at the Farm* began.

In July 2004, I was hired by Davidson UMC as their director of spiritual formation and remained in that role for seventeen years.

In December 2004, I had carried this dream of a Retreat House in my belly to a breaking point. I was willing to risk. My husband was not. My marriage was more important to me than the dream. If God wanted me to have both the dream & my marriage, then God would have to figure it out. I could not.

I was ready to bury the dream. I was exhausted. The end of the “term” was clear. The end of my strength had come. The end of the vision as I knew it was released. I remember lying prostrate on the floor asking God to forgive me for focusing on the Gift and not the Giver. If it NEVER came to life that was okay. I vowed NEVER to bring it up again. It was as if a boil had been lanced, and healing and freshness entered my spirit almost instantly.

- I'll spare you the details, but very shortly after that, Tom (my husband) spoke with me about beginning the process for the Retreat House. To say I was shocked is an understatement. Every feeling you can imagine, good and bad, accompanied me through the next few years.
- We built the Retreat House in 2005.
- We held our first retreat in January 2006.
- 90% of the Retreat House furnishings were donated.
- We are a 100% volunteer-operated Retreat House staff.
- Guests of the facility continue to respect and care for the sacred space.
- We give thanks and praise for the people's presence and support of this holy ground.

Daily, the dream — the far-fetched idea of providing people and organizations a sacred space apart to tend their souls, stretch their minds, and free their spirits — unfolds one nudge, one step at a time. As alongsiders (<https://www.thelydiagroup.com/alongsiders>) and I are faithful to tend to *the duty of the present moment*, we trust the next step will appear, leading us and others on our deeper journey together.

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## To Close

## METANOIA

The Spirit invited me to change directions. I was wooed. I was called. I entered into what seemed like a very long, dark passage. Tara Owens puts it beautifully: *I am the one who is bearing, and I am the one being born.*

**Reflect on her poem below.**

I did not seek  
this birthing,  
but you have drawn me  
into the passage;  
and I am the one  
who is bearing,  
and I am the one being born.

So in my  
longing  
yearning  
breaking  
gasping  
groaning  
laboring  
bearing  
birthing

I am asking,  
O God my midwife,  
deliver me.

*Amen, and amen.* Ann Starrette | [ann@TheLydiaGroup.com](mailto:ann@TheLydiaGroup.com)

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