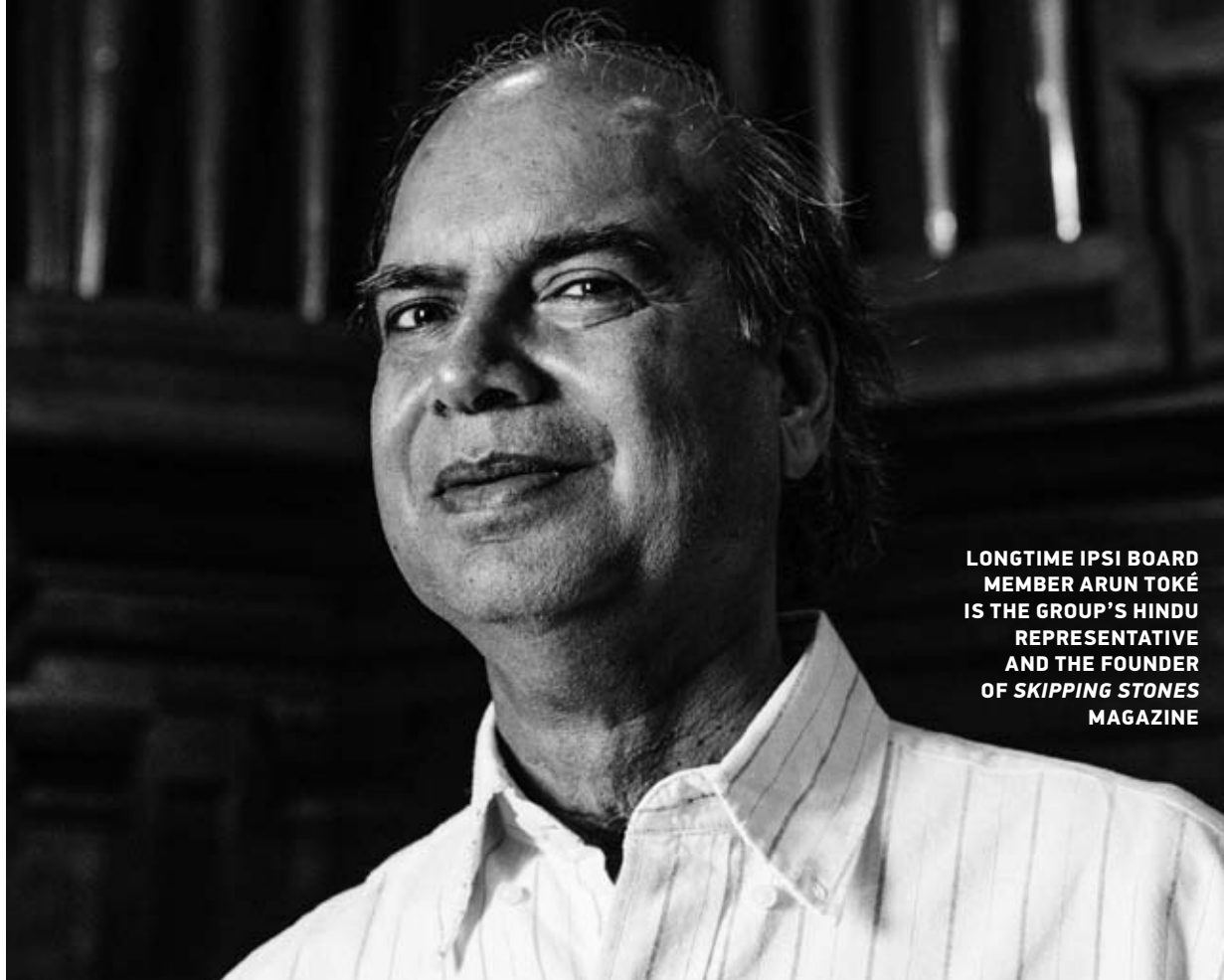


# A Vision of Peace



LONGTIME IPSI BOARD MEMBER ARUN TOKÉ IS THE GROUP'S HINDU REPRESENTATIVE AND THE FOUNDER OF *SKIPPING STONES* MAGAZINE

## EUGENE'S INTERFAITH PRAYER SERVICE INTERNATIONAL CONTINUES TO PROVIDE A REFUGE FOR ALL FAITHS BY CORINNE BOYER

**O**n Sept. 11, 2001, an informal interfaith prayer gathering took place on the steps of the former City Hall building in downtown Eugene.

One month later, members of the Sikh, Hindu, Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Baha'i and Native American communities organized an interfaith service at First Christian Church in Eugene. It was the start of the longest running interfaith service in North America.

Since then, the Interfaith Prayer Service International (IPSI) organization has held 187 services to pray for peace, celebrate differences and embrace the world's diverse faiths. These services have become a safe gathering place for people of all religions to connect with people in the community.

IPSI board member Kit Frisinger, a Christian representative, says she recalls the shock she experienced watching the morning news on Sept. 11 terror attacks that led to U.S. retaliation. Even today she says, "I feel terrible that we are bombing right now. We haven't stopped using weapons of destruction and violence."

The nonprofit holds a service on the eleventh of every

month, with 12 board members representing a variety of religious beliefs. Currently, the IPSI board is seeking Jewish and Muslim representatives.

Longtime board member Arun Toké was involved with an interfaith dialogue group in Eugene before assisting with the IPSI's establishment as a nonprofit. A few years after the terror attacks, his friend and professor asked him to become the Hindu representative for IPSI. Siri Kaur Khalsa-Harris, who was a Sikh representative, and her husband, Bill Harris, of the Baha'i faith, helped establish the group as a nonprofit in 2006.

"And so we all talked about the benefits of doing this a particular way, which is totally non-political and, of course, interfaith and egalitarian," Toké says of the early stages of organizing the group created in the wake of the Sept. 11. Khalsa-Harris wrote a letter in 2006 to potential IPSI board members proposing the idea of a permanent interfaith prayer service. She wrote that in 1996, while in deep meditation, she "was made aware that [she] should initiate a regular coming together of devotion from all faiths, especially those who might be or will be experiencing painful times."

After meeting Khalsa-Harris at a Sikh gathering, Sherab Tenaj was inspired to join the board as a Buddhist representative. Tenaj says Khalsa-Harris's "vision was so connected with the interfaith service that she really had the passion to make it last for a long time." Khalsa-Harris passed away in 2012.

After the attacks, hatred towards Muslims became widespread. The group saw an urgency to bring people together. So when this diverse religious community in Eugene saw an opportunity to facilitate intercultural understanding and provide a haven for all religions in response to watching the nation grapple with fear, grief and violence in 2001, they had no idea the need would remain constant.

### Arun Toké: Past and Present

Toké is also the founder and editor of *Skipping Stones*, a children's literary magazine. "I grew up in Indore, India," he explains. "Our neighbors spoke different languages. Some of them were Muslims, some were Sikh, some were Hindus and some were Christians."

The inspiration behind *Skipping Stones* came from a Gandhian ashram in India. "Gandhi used to say that if you want a fruit, you plant a seed and nurture that," he says, pointing to a photo of Gandhi above the magazine racks in the magazine's office.

Toké's vision of promoting cultural understanding began by connecting children around the globe with pen pals and publishing essays written by kids from different countries and faiths — and ultimately cultivating a magazine that has hosted intercultural dialogue for more than 27 years.

Throughout his life, Toké has relied on reciting the mantra of Lord Rama, a Hindu god, whenever he feels worried or afraid. Once he drove an old Volkswagen to California with his wife and son, and says he chanted the mantra the entire way. "My neighbor said, that must have taken a lot of prayers," Toké recalls. "It helps to have that external, that spiritual energy and knowing that somebody is there watching over you."

No one currently involved with the group expected the services to last more than a few years. Nationwide, violence targeting numerous religious groups has ebbed and flowed since the group's founding.

Muslims continue to be targets of hate crimes in the U.S. The Southern Poverty Law Center reported a 197 percent increase in Muslim hate groups from 2015 to 2016.

An uptick in threats of violence against Jewish Community Centers and vandalism in Jewish cemeteries have dominated headlines since the election of Donald Trump — who waived and hesitated to condemn the vandalism and threats.

In 2017, the Anti-Defamation League has recorded a plethora of anti-Semitic incidents in the U.S., which include 161 bomb threats, 155 vandalism incidents and six physical assaults. An Israeli teen was arrested recently and is accused of making over 2,000 threats to institutions worldwide.

### Envisioning Peace

The board members of IPSI say they have worked hard to avoid politicizing the group, but when the Muslim and Jewish communities have experienced threats and violent incidents, IPSI has supported them.

Though many of the nonprofit's members are active in the social justice community, they agree that its mission is important because it celebrates acceptance, other religions and peace.

"It's not — well to me anyway — it's not about religion," says board president Hafiz Lealand, who represents Sufism. "It's really about unity as it says in the program I think, its about unity and peace and a safe place for people to be right free of politics and discrimination and other negative things, which seem to be little bit on the rise since November."

Just after the presidential election, Lealand says, the number of people attending services doubled.

"In 2001, there were some threats against the Islamic community after Sept. 11, and so at that time we all went as a group to hold a vigil there [at the mosque] and then