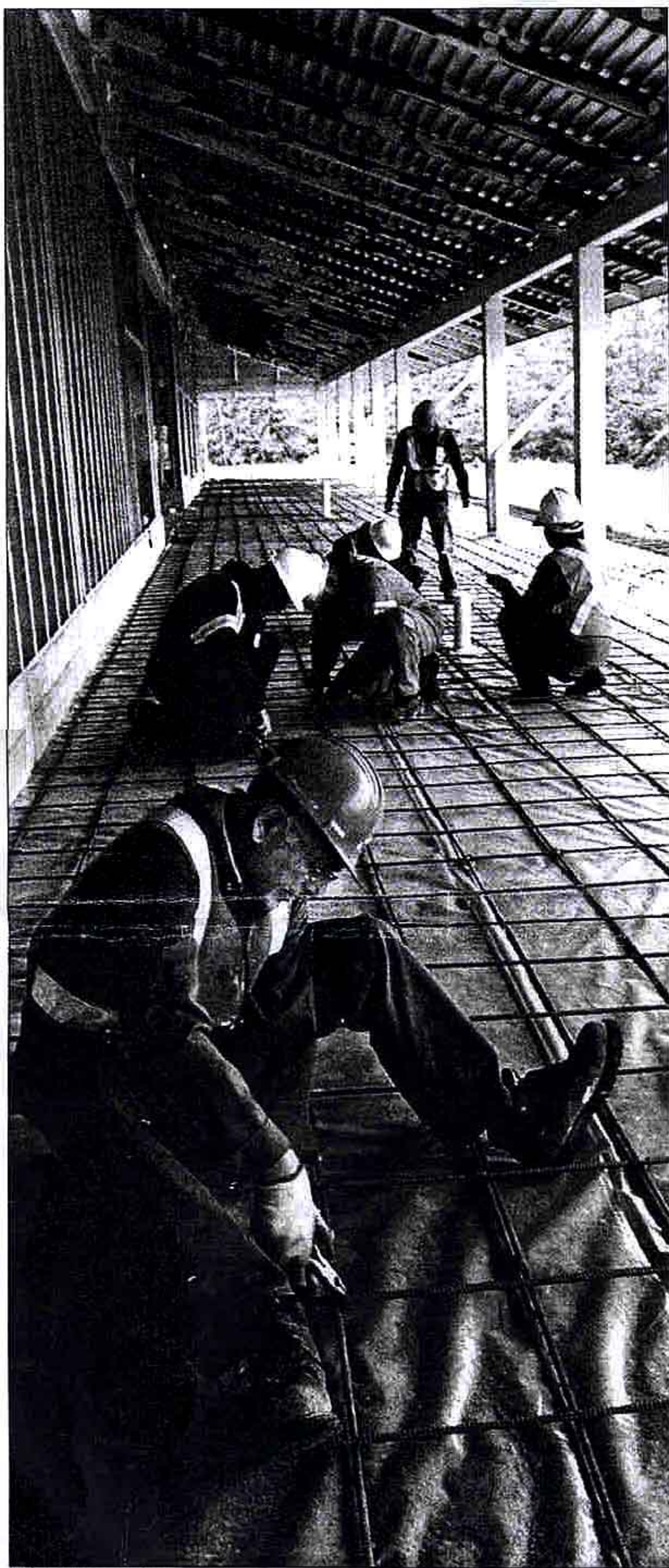


Room for 2,000 philosophers



Many volunteers keep the faith on huge project

Brooke Larsen

Staff Reporter

In a long, low cafeteria, Sukhdev Bhanbra sips milky chai from a tin mug.

Wearing an orange fluorescent vest and hardhat, he chats and chuckles with six other men, a short break from a long day of toil.

When the tea is gone they will go back to work on an outdoor walkway, the trill of robins in their ears.

Volunteers like Bhanbra have spent seven years building a massive study centre at 29 Avenue and 176 Street for members of the Radha Soami Satsang Beas (RSSB), a mystic Indian philosophy that combines Sikhism, Hinduism and Christianity.

While they work, they imagine the hundreds, maybe thousands, who will gather on this 50-acre chunk of farmland, to teach, to learn and to meditate.

Next year, the centre will be finished.

It's been a long haul for Bhanbra, now on leave from his construction job to volunteer full-time, but the work is fulfilling.

"Everyone here is doing the best they can do," the Surrey resident said.

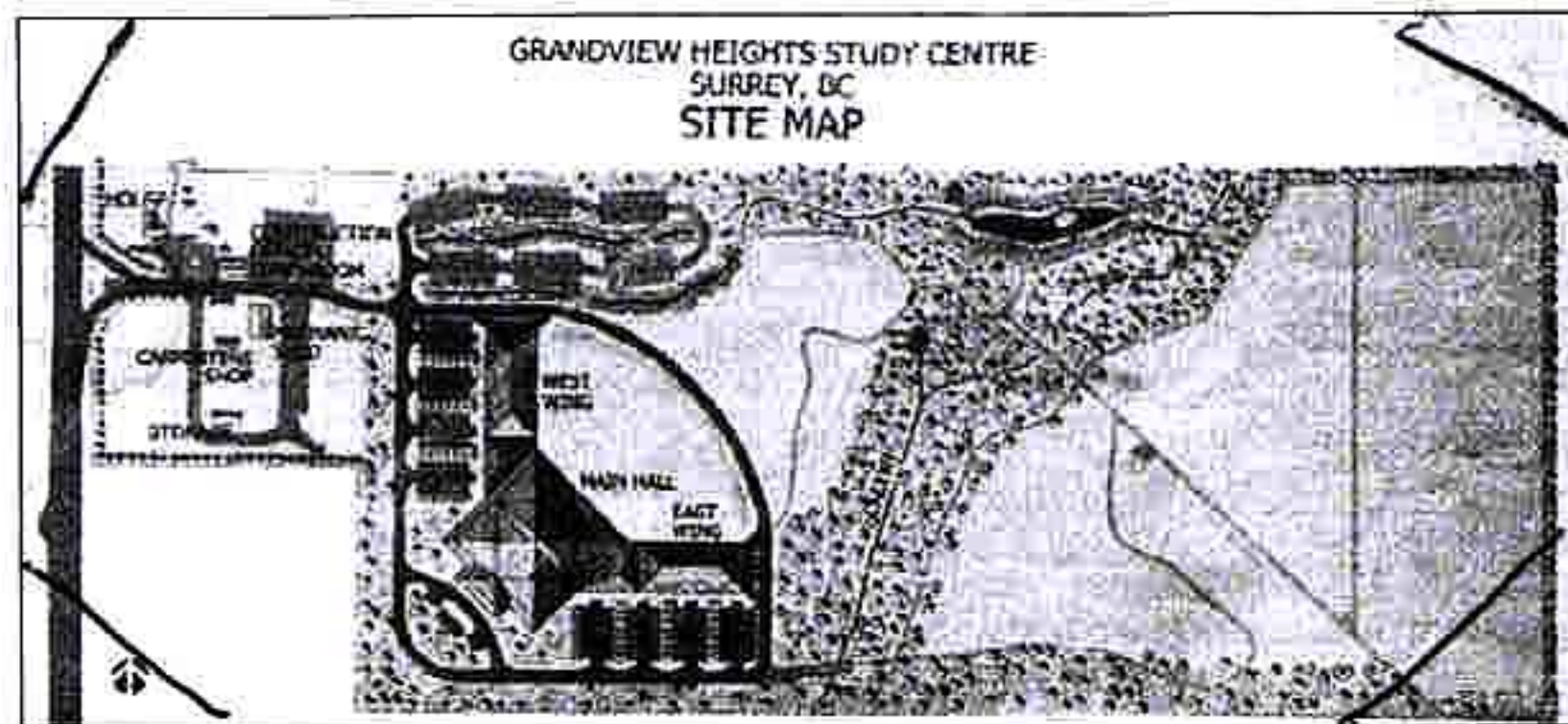
But unlike Bhanbra, many in the 80-plus volunteer pool have full-time jobs and no construction experience, a challenge for building manager John Pope.

A professional engineer during the week, Pope spends his weekends training doctors and lawyers to dig trenches, lay pipes and nail studs.

"The rest of the world is doing fast-track projects. This is a slow-track project," Pope said.

Sometimes the pace tries his patience, especially when he compares it to the sizzling growth on the rest of the Peninsula. As consolation, he reminds himself that Austria's Salzburg Cathedral took more than 200 years to build.

"Compared to that, we're doing pretty well," he chuckles.



But the two buildings could not be more different.

Instead of marble facades and Baroque frescoes, the centre is spare and sturdy, clean lines without arch or ornament.

No cross or crescent moon tops the roof. No portraits of Budha or Vishnu or Christ adorn the walls.

Low farm buildings squat at the centre's entrance off 176 Street. A gravel road curls around the

library, winding past the cafeteria and the centerpiece — a 900-square-metre concrete box that seats 2,000.

Bhanbra said the group wanted the centre to blend in with its surroundings, offering a peaceful spot for members to meditate and listen to lectures.

"It's a nice, green, quiet space," Bhanbra said.

"We've been very conscious of esthetics," Pope added. "We want it to look kind of farmy."

Compared to grand-daddies like Hinduism, RSSB is a toddler on the religious scene.

Started in northern India in 1891 by Soami Shiv Diyal and Jaimal Singh Ji Maharaj, it has two million followers worldwide, about 700 of them in the Lower Mainland.

Followers believe they can connect with God through meditation, a vegetarian diet and avoiding drugs and alcohol.

Pope, who grew up in the Church of Scotland and retains a slight accent, insists RSSB isn't a religion at all, but a philosophy, since it doesn't require members forced to follow rules or give up their faiths.

Instead, RSSB focuses on the elements all religions have in

common — for example, the belief in leading a moral life.

These similarities are more interesting to the group's Christian, Islamic, Buddhist, Sikh, Hindu and Jewish followers than

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Sukhdev Bhanbra
Volunteer

their differences, Pope said.

"That's what appeals to a lot of professionals. The answers are found internally," he said.

RSSB's seed was planted in Vancouver in the '60s, when a

handful of members started meeting in the West Vancouver Community Centre, later moving to Vancouver's Mt. Pleasant Community Centre.

Over the years, the following has grown, but members have nowhere to hold larger meetings.

"We've always had this idea of having our own place," Pope said.

In 1999, the group bought 50 acres in South Surrey using donations collected over 30 years, and started building in 2000.

The congregation plans to hold weekly meetings in the new centre next year.

Pope, who lives in Belcarra, said he expects 400 people — from Vancouver, Surrey and Langley — to show up, even though the centre can accommodate 2,000.

Last year the group rented the auditorium at Surrey's Pacific Academy school for its summer conference, attracting 1,500 people.

The project has cost \$6 million so far, but Pope estimates the price tag would be double if the group had hired a construction crew.

Surrey building manager Nick Marach said the city allows volunteer labour on construction projects, as long as a qualified engineer supervises.

City inspectors have visited the site several times, he said.

"I haven't heard any cause for alarm. It's not as if they're going off on their own by any means."

For Bhanbra, building the centre has been a chance to build friendships and do good in his community — an important aspect of both his Sikh faith and RSSB.

"We've put everything we've got into it," Bhanbra added. "The rest is up to you-know-who."

Brian Giebelhaus photos

UBC engineer Gurnam Sandhu (above) ties rebar for the concrete sidewalk by the west wing of the massive Radha Soami Satsang Beas study centre at 29 Avenue and 176 Street.

